

The ABC of communication skills: Dealing with conflict

Conflicts are normal and part of (long-term) social relationships. They are not necessarily bad. They can be an opportunity to strengthen the relationship or for personal development. It is important not to let the conflict escalate (into an argument), but to resolve it constructively. In the event of a conflict, both parties are usually convinced that they are in the right. It is also human to want to defend yourself if you feel attacked. The other person will feel exactly the same.

Here are a few tips you should take into consideration to help you find a constructive solution to the problem:

- Firstly, calm yourself down if you feel too upset to talk calmly at the moment (for example, take a walk or ask for time to think).
- Take your feelings seriously and think about exactly what is disturbing/annoying you (specific situation, behavior).
- Consider whether there is a deeper/more fundamental cause for the current conflict. Is there an unfulfilled need behind your discontent/that is triggering your anger?
- Think about whether or not you want to address the issue.
- Describe your own position and perspective as accurately as possible giving specific examples.
- Use “I” messages and avoid using “you” or “one”.
- Avoid generalizations like “always”, “never” etc. and address a specific situation/example of behavior.
- Avoid pointing the finger (e.g.: “You never listen properly.”). Also avoid looking for someone to blame for the conflict. Usually both sides are to blame.
- Try to stay objective and calm.
- Make sure to use a calm tone, a relaxed facial expression and face the other person.
- Express yourself in simple, clear and understandable terms.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Be open. Listen carefully to your counterpart and let them speak.

The ABC of communication skills: Dealing with conflict

- Accept and respect that everyone has a right to their opinion.
- Try to understand the other person's point of view, because there is no "right" opinion.
- Ask if you don't understand something.
- Be ready to compromise and work together to find a solution, but also accept that there may not be a (quick) resolution.
- Apologize if necessary and be ready to reconcile yourself.

Side note: The Marshall B. Rosenberg method of non-violent communication

This communication method helps you to communicate objectively and constructively and avoid escalations. The four steps of nonviolent communication are:

1. Observations (reporting the facts)
2. Feelings (describing your emotions and feelings in first person form, no accusations)
3. Needs (communicating your need that is not being/has not been met)
4. Requests (explaining what you would like from the other person, but not making this a demand)

Example:

"When I saw that the dishwasher had not been emptied (1), this annoyed me (2) because it is important to me that we stick to the cleaning schedule/our arrangements so we retain a friendly atmosphere in the apartment (3) and so I am asking you to empty the dishwasher promptly in future and to be more reliable next time (4)."