What it Takes to Get Along

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Have you ever asked "why can't people just get along?" Or thought about all the conflict that occurs in life? By some estimates managers in the workplace spend 20 percent of their time dealing with conflict. When you add in the time managers spend overcoming differences of opinion, that number goes up even higher. At home, couples and parents spend comparable time in disagreement. One study found that couples argue seven times a day. Parents of independent toddlers and rebellious teenagers often feel their entire day is spent in conflict. In government, conflict is perhaps most noticeable. Not only is there constant disagreement being portrayed by the media, political leaders seem to delight in expressing their displeasure for each other at every public event. Even when not in direct conflict, they apparently spend a lot of time thinking about how to undermine each other.

What causes so much conflict? Is it simply that people are self-centered? For sure many people put their interests ahead of others, but that just scratches the surface. There is also the reality that people are unique individuals who have their own styles, desires, likes, dislikes, personalities, and values. Perhaps even more problematic is that people are generally poor communicators. They don't know how to share differences of opinion, share their frustrations, gain buy-in, or make their point in a constructive way. They often cross people's defense-triggering thresholds or worse—put people on the counter-offensive.

What makes all of the conflict in life so bewildering is that most of it produces no value. Instead, it creates animosity and disunity which creates more conflict and wastes more time. Sadly, in extreme cases it causes wars and ruins people's lives. Selfish people, in particular, spend a lot of time complaining, blaming, and doing things to benefit themselves at others' expense. Yes, conflict has its benefits such as when it leads to better solutions and compromises, but there is a big difference between destructive and constructive conflict.

Think about how much more value could be produced in government, the workplace, and at home if all the time spent in divisiveness was redirected toward working collaboratively. Rather than attacking and counter-attacking each other, ideas could be shared, debated constructively, and solutions agreed upon that best meet the needs of all parties.

Are there alternatives to destructive conflict? Of course there are.

If you would like more harmony and unity, consider the principles below. These help prevent discord and divisiveness whether at home, work, or in the community:

1. **Think collaboratively.** Value the involvement of others in setting direction and making decisions. Know that you can accomplish more by cooperating with others than by working alone, or worse—bullying or arguing. Sharing differences of opinion is part of leading a normal life but rather than view others as competitors or adversaries, view them as allies.

2. **Be openminded.** Be open to new ways of thinking and doing. You don't have all the answers or best ideas. No one does. Someone else will someday come up with a better idea than yours. Be available and openminded or you will miss it. Even if another's idea is inferior, consider adopting it or parts of it to give the person a sense of contribution and satisfaction. Value relationships as much as, or more than, being right.

3. **Understand interests and needs.** Get to know people. Ask questions. Seek to understand their goals, ideas, values, priorities, and motives before sharing your own or taking a position. Even if you think you know what they will say or need, give them time to talk. In some cases, people just need to vent or feel heard. Be an attentive listener.

4. **Provide help.** Care about the interests of others. Look for opportunities to assist, serve, and give. When someone is struggling, help them. When someone new joins the team or new neighbors move in, offer to help them. Provide information and resources. Don't expect it, but what you do for others is often repaid and sometimes returned with *interest*.

5. **Show empathy.** Before disagreeing or stating a different opinion, show your understanding. Let people know you relate to how they feel and think. You don't have to validate their ideas, but let them know you understand them without expressing judgement. If possible, compliment them. Appreciate differences in styles, skills, personalities, and thought. Empathy fosters a spirit of cooperation.

6. **Create alignment.** Set yourselves up for success. Discuss and agree on as much as possible. Explore reasonable options and philosophies. Align on how decisions will be made and evaluated. Establish shared expectations, goals, accountability measures, and consequences. Agree on budgets, resources, roles, responsibilities, dependencies, timeframes, processes, and other topics that need to be agreed upon.

7. **Communicate.** Be authentic and transparent. Provide frequent and meaningful progress updates. Facilitate dialog and information exchange. A void of communication is often filled with anxiety and uncertainty. People tend to assume the worst when left uninformed. When there is no change, let people know there is nothing new to report.

8. **Be respectful.** Control your emotions. Allow people to retain their dignity when debating. Don't let another's words or actions control you. Don't lower yourself to another's destructive ways. While it may make you feel better to berate someone who frustrates you, realize that maintaining civility and the relationship is more important.

9. **Don't take comments too personally.** Maintain your self-confidence. Don't outsource your self-esteem by depending on others' validation. There will always be people you don't like or whom don't like you. Everyone has critics. Be open to feedback, but don't get upset when people don't think like you. It is all right for people to have differences of opinion—even beneficial.

10. **Be trustworthy and dependable.** Take responsibility. Do what you say you are going to do. Remain loyal to people, goals, plans, and the priorities agreed upon. Be responsive to requests. Follow through and finish what you start. Be competent in your areas of responsibility. Execute with excellence. Set the example for others to follow. Have nothing to hide.

11. **Be likable.** People want to work and collaborate with people they like. Be friendly and enjoyable to be around. Be positive. Have a can-do attitude. Show gratitude for what others do. Give compliments and praise as often as possible. Give others credit for the work they do. Make people feel good about themselves. Be a confidence builder for others.

12. **Maintain accountability.** Track progress against agreed upon expectations and responsibilities including working collaboratively. Review, discuss, and agree on what is working and not working. Discuss and agree on adjustments to be made to achieve desired outcomes. Reward collaboration. Implement both reinforcing and correcting consequences.

13. **Forgive.** No one is perfect. If people take responsibility for their past mistakes, learn from them, and make changes to avoid them in the future, forgive them. Place value on the adversity that people have gone through. Adversity is a great teacher. Consider that if you had their upbringing, experiences, and circumstances, you might have made the same mistakes. Don't hold grudges.

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