

10 Techniques for Managing Conflict

by Josh Christie



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Most of the information published on managing conflict begins with the words ‘conflict is natural and happens in every relationship.’ As Freight Brokers and Agents, we definitely understand. If we’re not wrestling with pricing negotiations or high-pressure timelines, we’re attempting to resolve a wide range of delays and shipping challenges. This article provides helpful insight into managing the conflict that is a big part of our day-to-day activities.

The Benefits of Conflict

Before we dive into the techniques of managing conflict, let’s look at the actual benefits of conflict. That’s right; there are benefits. Some argue that [we should be disagreeing more at work](#).

- **Better Outcomes.** Liane Davey, author of the aptly titled book *You First: Inspire Your Team to Grow Up, Get Along, and Get Stuff Done*, states, ‘Conflict is uncomfortable, but it is the source of true innovation, and also a critical process in identifying and mitigating risks.’ When conflict arises, we often wish it would go away. Instead, we need to embrace it, work through it, and value it for what it can bring in the way of better solutions and outcomes to challenging problems.
- **Better Relationships.** We’ve all been in a situation where a relationship isn’t working, either with a customer, a boss, or an employee. When you are leery of even talking with someone, it makes for anxiety at work. And when communication is shut down, you can’t progress on challenging problems. Openly managing conflict breaks down these barriers and opens up relationships for the better.
- **Better Learning and Growth.** If a conflict has shut down communication, you’re stuck with your own thoughts and ideas, for better or, more likely, for worse. Open communication and challenges to your ideas can serve to test them, helping you fully develop your rationale. It can also provide new thinking, help you learn more, and, as a result, grow.

Managing Conflict: Techniques that Work

So, there are significant benefits that come from conflict. That means we need to learn how to engage and succeed in any situation where conflict arises. Here are the techniques we found to work throughout our careers and personal lives.

1 — Listen Actively. When we’re talking, we are not learning. Sometimes it is best to be quiet and let the person vent. Listening to many different perspectives can also help define the problem you’re trying to solve. Plus, it improves your ability to connect with carriers and customers. It’s important to remember to keep the resolution to the issue in mind. This approach can remove feelings of personal attack.

2 — Parroting. Paraphrasing is perhaps a better word than parroting. But you get the gist. It’s about demonstrating that you are listening actively. Once you’ve heard their side of the conflict, parrot it back to them to show them you understand their perspective. Use phrases such as ‘you are saying... Do I understand?’ That last one should solicit a ‘yes,’ which helps get the conversation going in the right direction.

3 — Use Neutral Language. Listening and parroting got things off on the right foot. Now it’s your turn to express your perspective. First, make sure you’re not raising your voice. Then use words that aren’t going to inflame the situation. No profanity, exaggerations, or name-calling. Use words like ‘I’ rather than ‘you.’ That approach points out that you’re expressing your perspective rather than attributing a perspective to someone else, which can lead to misinterpretation and anger. ‘Don’t put words in my mouth’ can be a common response when using the wrong approach in this situation and ultimately lead to increasing the conflict.

4 — Separate the Person from the Problem. Any conflict serves to narrow our focus to the person delivering the message. Instead, it’s far better to focus on the situation or behavior. One approach is to ask the other person if we can place the problem on a table and look at it from all sides. Those sides include those in conflict, but it also opens it up to different viewpoints and clearly separates the problem from the person.

5 — Work Together. It shouldn’t be about who’s right or wrong. It needs to be about solving the problem. That means taking responsibility and ownership rather than attempting to place blame. Working together means listening to each other’s perspectives and breaking down the challenges required to solve the problem.

6 — Assess the Conflict. Active listening and parroting to confirm your understanding should go a long way toward assessing the basis for conflict. There will be many factors at play, including anger at a situation or person, the fear of losing, or someone trying to use conflict to get their way. Search also for what may have triggered the conflict, including long unresolved issues that continue to arise with each new development.

7 — Define the Real Issue. By this time, you should have more than enough information to define in concrete terms the real issue. That may take a few rounds to complete the definition and gain everyone’s buy-in to the problem you’re attempting to resolve together. Without a problem definition, tossing around potential solutions is a losing game since an undefined target can keep changing, thwarting any effort at resolution.

8 — Explore Solutions. Now that the problem has been defined to everyone’s satisfaction, begin discussions of ways to solve the problem. That will involve finding common ground with all parties. Developing a solution that only one party can accept should be rejected but not without first examining it for potential aspects of a broader solution. It’s vital at this point to use the same skills noted above: listening, parroting, and neutral language. Otherwise, you risk inflaming emotions once more.

9 — Focus on the Future. Once an agreement has been reached on the solution, it’s crucial to define everyone’s responsibilities. Then establish a timeline for completion. That timeline should also include a method for regularly evaluating how things are going so that you can head off future issues together.

10 — Agree to Disagree. Sometimes a conflict can’t be resolved no matter the approach or methodology we take in our attempts. That’s when ‘managing conflict’ becomes a long-term effort. People have their own opinions and may not be open to change. But you can demonstrate your respect for their choice. But don’t feel you need to abandon your position. Stating, ‘I understand your position, but at this point, I disagree. It appears that the only way forward is to agree to disagree.’

Those are our ten techniques for managing conflict. We wish you the best in your day-to-day challenges and hope this article has added a bit more to your conflict management insight and toolbox.

If you haven’t yet tuned into our BETTERLIFE™ with D&L video series, now’s a great time. In our S1E6, we sat down for an [interview with April Siefert](#), a social cognitive psychologist who provides insight into performance psychology and how we can improve our performance amidst stressful life challenges.

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