

Five for fighting: Tips to diffuse hostile environments

By Francie Dalton

Distinguish yourself and develop a competitive advantage over your peers by becoming known as the “go-to” person when hostilities erupt.

Whether diffusing your own hostile situation, or intervening to help others, these tips will help lessen both the duration and the intensity of altercations, and create a bridge between feuding parties.

Focus on objectives, not on behaviors

Regardless of your adversary’s behavior, focusing on and reacting to that behavior isn’t useful. Instead, realize that we use our behaviors to reach objectives. For example, we might use anger to intimidate, humor to disarm, tears to gain comfort, malice for revenge, etc. Steel yourself against the seduction of righteous indignation about your adversary’s behavior, and try instead to discern what the behavior is being used to achieve. You’ve succeeded if you’re clear about what your adversary wants.

Conduct an excavation

Knowing what your adversary wants isn’t enough; you must also discern why your adversary wants it. To gain this information, elicit the continued venting of your adversary by asking non-judgmental, curious, and wondering questions. Don’t begin questions with the word “why” as this generates defensiveness.

Instead, use phrases such as “Tell me more about ...”; “And if what you’re asking for occurs, the result would be...”; “And this would help you...?”; “So your interest here is to...?” You’ve succeeded if you’re clear about the reasons your adversary wants whatever it is she wants.

Don’t leap immediately to solutions

Even if you can instantly see any number of possible solutions, this isn’t the time to articulate them. Instead, take time to empathize with the emotions that have surfaced. Don’t just regurgitate what was said; acknowledge and honor their feelings by saying something like: “Sounds like you’re really concerned about ...” “So it seems like you’re feeling pretty much as if ...”; “So you’re feeling pretty exasperated with ...” You’ve succeeded if your adversary confirms your assessment. If more venting occurs at this time, let it happen.

Acknowledge an element of truth in the allegations

This is crucial, because it works to disarm your adversary. If you self-assess in a way that’s consistent with how your adversary sees you, you’ll take a huge amount of wind out of their sails. Examples could include: “I can see why you think I did that on purpose”; “I can understand why you feel bullied”; “It’s clear to me now why you think I’ve been unfair”; “It must seem to you that I’m making the wrong decision”;

“I sure can see why I look like the bad guy right now”.

Elaborate on these phrases, being specific about your ability to see your adversary’s point of view. You’ve succeeded if your adversary stops speaking, and seems to be waiting for what comes next.

Vet possible solutions

Float a possible solution, making sure that it meets the “why” requirements uncovered in step two above. Preface your suggestion with phrases such as “What would you think about ... ?”; “How about if we... ?”; “I wonder if it might help to ... “

Be prepared to vet more than one solution. Even if you don’t identify a mutually agreeable solution, you’ve been successful if your adversary evidences a solution orientation.

In any altercation, the one who solves it is the one who is committed to behaving in a way that, upon reflection, inspires a sense of pride. All it takes is making the decision to be self-disciplined, and to focus on results. Why not decide now to be that person?

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