

Turning Conflict into Compromise

Do as I say and not as I do. How many times have you said this, or heard it said by an influential adult or parent? I know as a mentor for many youth in the local 4-H program this is something I struggle with. I have found that this saying doesn't work. No matter how many times you tell a young person not to do something, if you do it in front of them you are teaching them that the behavior is acceptable.

Conflict is a natural part of life that stems from different beliefs, experiences, and values. Adults deal with conflict on a regular basis. However, at some point in time conflict becomes unhealthy for not only adults, but also the children who have to deal with that conflict -- the same way a non-smoker has to deal with second hand smoke. If not managed conflict can harm relationships, families, workplaces, and organizations.

Although conflict is unavoidable there are ways to resolve conflict and look for compromises. The first is understanding what compromise is. A compromise is a way that two parties who have a disagreement can settle their differences. Settling is not always easy, it means that we have to give up what we really want and look for different solutions that both parties can deal with. When we look at compromising the following steps are key in reaching success for both adults and youth.

1. Treat the other person with respect - Although respecting the other person during a conflict is challenging, we must try. Words of disrespect block communication and may create wounds that may never heal. Raising your voice or yelling can instantly turn the other person off to anything you have to say, even if you have a great idea. People who speak with an even tone and don't accuse others gain respect and can often have their ideas heard better than others.

2. Focus on the problem, not the person. – If you take this on as a personal issue against another person there is no way to compromise, and in the end no one actually wins. When speaking about the conflict start your sentences with “I” rather than an accusing “you”.

3. Make sure everyone is on the same page. - Describe the conflict in clear, concrete terms. Be specific when answering the who, what, when, where, and why questions. Describe behaviors, feelings, consequences, and desired changes.

4. Communicate understanding – Listening is important. Having an open mind will get you closer to resolution. Gain an understanding of where the other person is coming from, seek first to understand, then to be understood.

5. Find solutions. – You have already found that one or both parties does not like the current situation and proposed solutions, so what other things can be done to make both parties agree? Think outside the box and look for new things that have not yet been explored.

6. Find a middle ground – This is the hardest step. For youth and even adults it is hard to realize that their way is not the right way or the only way. Agree on the most workable solution and most importantly be committed to resolving the conflict.

7. Evaluate. – Allow the solution to have time to work and then as a group come back and make sure that everyone is satisfied with the outcome. If not adjust as necessary.

The seven step above sound easy, but dealing with conflict and reaching compromise really isn't. The key is to start with an open mind realizing that the outcome may be different than what you originally anticipated. Listen carefully to others and be willing to learn from them. Working with a variety of groups I have found that everyone can contribute good ideas, but helping others to see your point of view takes a lot of patience, the ability to listening, and the willingness to compromise.

For more information on this topic or other youth development topics please contact the University of Missouri Extension Office at 660-885-5556.