



Is All Conflict Negative and Unproductive?
AN IGNITE WHITE PAPER

July 2009

Suzanne B. Alpert
Igniter / Consultant
suzanne@weigniteit.com

Contents:

* Stressful Times = Conflict	2
* Passive Communication	3
* Aggressive Communication	3
* Assertive Communication	3
* Guidelines for Communicating Assertively	3-4
* Ignite Solutions	4

Is All Conflict Negative and Unproductive?

There's no doubt about it – these are stressful times. With the economic downfall and global crises, it's no wonder people are on edge. If you haven't experienced it yourself, you probably know people who are fearful about losing their job, worried their house may be foreclosed or not being able to pay their monthly bills or kid's college tuition. With all this tension and anxiety, conflict has become more prevalent than ever before, both at home and in the workplace.

It just so happened that as I was preparing to write this paper, I spent a weekend with my family at the beach. As I'm sure every family experiences, there were disagreements between spouses, siblings, in-laws, neighbors, – you name it. (This was just over the course of two days together, so you can just imagine the stress that may take place over the extended holidays!) Heated conversations covered everything from where outspoken Aunt Millie would sit at the upcoming family reunion to more emotional issues of divorce, finances and politics. The same happens in the workplace where conflicts may range from a simple disagreement between two colleagues, to losing a major account, to laying off your workforce or to making costly legal decisions.

So, how do we effectively deal with conflict and is all conflict negative?

Some people **communicate passively** to conflict by choosing to avoid it completely, giving in to others' requests or saying nothing. This may be appropriate when the issue is of little importance and there's no strong opinion about the outcome. However, when individuals continually shy away from difficult conversations or do not stand up for themselves, they may be taken advantage of or lose respect from others. In the short run, not addressing an issue may seem like the easiest approach to passive individuals, but it often causes more stress down the road for all parties involved. Avoiding an argument altogether can fuel tension and resentment to a point where it may eventually explode.

Another reaction to conflict is to **communicate aggressively**. This usually takes the form of loud and offensive language, where force or power is used to bully another person. Whether or not it is intended, aggressiveness is used to control, hurt, belittle or embarrass another individual. Aggressive people may "win" or get their way in the short run, but this is typically because others respond to them out of fear, not out of respect. Because of their over-powering behavior, aggressive individuals tend *not* to have true friends or loyal employees. Their main concern is to win the argument and as a result, their relationships suffer. The bottom line with aggressive behavior is that there is no mutual goal or positive outcome - it's only to vent negative emotions and dominate the conversation.

Conflict is natural and every family and organization experiences it. What kind of world would it be if we were all alike, had the same opinions, didn't take risks to challenge one another, or bring different viewpoints to the party?

Lately, our Ignite clients are requesting conflict resolution techniques more than ever. In our training workshops, we emphasize the principles of **assertive communication**. Unlike passive or aggressive styles, assertive individuals stand up for themselves by expressing their opinions and feelings in a clear, direct and non-threatening manner. They view conflict as an opportunity to analyze situations objectively, assess the needs of both parties and come up with a solution that helps both sides. They foster honest and proactive communication and as a result are respected, trusted and listened to by others.

The following are general guidelines for communicating assertively:

- ✦ **Stop and Think:** Step back, collect your thoughts and be in a rational state before the confrontation. You're more likely to get your desired results when you are calm and prepared to deliver your message.
- ✦ **Be Clear and Specific:** Define and speak objectively to the real issue. Avoid bringing up past arguments or making sweeping statements such as "You never. . ." or "You always. . .". Be ready to cite observations, facts and details to support your message.



Learn something. Spark everything.™

- ✱ **Determine your Desired Outcome:** Have a clear picture about the intended outcome of the conversation. Know specifically what you would like to happen as a result of confronting the situation and make your requests reasonable.
- ✱ **Listen to Understand:** Give the other person a chance to share another side of the issue. Be open to a new point of view. Maybe there's more to the situation that you weren't aware of or a solution to the problem you hadn't considered.
- ✱ **Show Respect:** Even if you don't like the behavior of the person, be appropriate and respectful. Be aware of your body language and tone of voice as you deliver your message.
- ✱ **Look for Solutions:** Compromise, or better yet, look for a solution where both parties feel positive about the next steps. When appropriate, agree to disagree - you may be coming from two different view points and that's OKAY.
- ✱ **Commit and Follow Up:** End the conversation with a specific commitment of how you will interact more effectively in the future. Revisit the conversation, should the commitment not be honored.

The message here is that not all conflict is negative and unproductive. Communicating assertively creates an atmosphere where people are clear, direct and honest, even when they disagree. Handling conflict effectively opens up opportunities to strengthen interpersonal relationships, build cohesive work teams and work

successfully toward a common goal and positive results.

Ignite specializes in working with business teams that struggle with stress and conflict. Whether it's for the board of directors or front line staff, we provide coaching and communication tools that give teams practical skills to address conflict effectively for successful results. Please call us if you would like to discuss conflict resolution and other training and development workshops for your work team.

*Suzanne B. Alpert, Ignite
Igniter / Consultant*
suzanne@weigniteit.com