

Resolving Conflict: Six Simple Steps to Keeping the Peace

By [Susan Steinbrecher](#)

One of the most challenging roles of an effective leader is that of "peacekeeper." Resolving conflicts in the workplace takes negotiation skills, patience and a healthy dose of emotional intelligence (EI).

Wikipedia's definition of EI is: "the ability to identify, assess, and control the emotions of oneself, of others and of groups." A wide variety of models and definitions have been proposed throughout the years on emotional intelligence but it is a scientifically accepted and measurable characteristic of effective management. Our company has done hundreds of hours of research into EI, as we feel it is a significant tool that allows us to gain further insight into the tumultuous world of conflict resolution.

So how can executives tap into this "EI factor" to solve pervasive conflict in the workplace?

The conflict resolution model that we recommend involves six basic steps and three golden rules. This is an influencing model that works for discussions that involve problem solving. It may be used for conflict resolution, as well as in other business applications. It is particularly effective when it's necessary to hold a person accountable -- be it a performance review or any type of agreement -- even a peer-to-peer issue.

Here's how it works: In any dialogue, there are two fundamental needs that must be met -- the ego need and the practical need. The ego needs are: to be listened to, valued, appreciated, empathized with, involved, and empowered. The practical need refers to the obvious: the reason for having the discussion that focuses on the conflict that needs to be solved.

To address both needs, employ the Three Golden Rules of Engagement:

1. Listen and respond with empathy

2. Be involved; ask for the other person's opinions, ideas and thoughts

3. Maintain and affirm self-esteem

Remember that a great deal of the message you are trying to convey is done so by your body language and tone of voice. The body, soul and heart cannot lie -- unless you are a diagnosed sociopath! So keep these things in mind when responding.

Using the example of the employer or manager, and employee, I have set out several examples that follow. One scenario deals with chronic tardiness, the other deals with a personality conflict affecting a team project. The most important thing to keep in mind is that if the employee doesn't feel that they were heard or that they have achieved a "win" out of the discussion then they will not be motivated or resolve to change.

It all comes down to compliance versus commitment. Without question, the person involved in the discussion or conflict resolution will be far more committed to the outcome if they feel empowered by it. As you go through the six-step process, look for ways to weave in the golden rules: listening and responding with empathy, maintaining or affirming self-esteem and involving the person. Remember to make eye contact and address the person by name in all exchanges.

Six Steps to Conflict Resolution

1. **Discuss the situation in a respectful manner.** Example: "I noticed you've been late with the project targets a number of times this month, which seems out of character for you - you're always so reliable!" Don't say, "You are always late meeting deadlines." This just gets the person's back up.

2. **Be specific.** If you say, "I noticed that on Tuesday the 15th, as well as Monday and Friday of last month you were several days late submitting your portion of the project brief," the person realizes you are aware of the situation and that they have to address the issue. Their explanation is a perfect opportunity for you to listen and respond with empathy. Remember: you do not necessarily have to agree with someone to empathize with them. You are simply attempting to put yourself in that person's shoes - if only for a moment -- not condemning or condoning the

behavior.

3. Discuss how a conflict (or problem) impacts you, the work group, or the project. "I am not sure you are aware of the full impact of the conflict between you and your team. The other associates are witnessing this, and it is making them uncomfortable... what do you feel is going on?" Remember, *you are asking not telling*.

4. Ask for the specific cause of the conflict. "From your perspective, what is happening here? You get along well with most everyone here so what is causing the conflict?" Remember to empathize again after their response, rather than say, "Yes, but you've got to get along." The word "but" negates everything positive you just said.

If you have to fall on a conjunction, pick "and." "Yes, I can imagine the challenge this presents -- *and* we need to come up with a solution. What ideas might you have?"

5. Ask for the solution. For instance, "What do you think you need to do to help solve this situation? What is your next step?" This brings in accountability.

6. Agree on the action to be taken. This step is often missed and it's the most important one. Think of it as a recap. "So what I am hearing you say is that you are going to talk this through with your team members (discuss details). By when were you thinking of doing that?" The last step is to close on a positive note and ask them to get back to you on the outcome.

Leaders, entrepreneurs and business executives from all backgrounds can benefit by learning the art of *heart-centered communication* -- which is simply, authentic communication that comes from a place of respect for self and others. When a heart-centered approach to conflict resolution is engaged, more often than not, it can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes.