

Conflict to Dialogue

Use hostage negotiating techniques.



by George Kohlrieser

THE CHANCE OF BEING TAKEN hostage with a weapon is small. However, anyone can become a metaphorical hostage in a relationship with a boss, employee, colleague, or customer without a physical weapon being involved.

Most people are dissatisfied in their jobs. In fact, 72 percent of employees in the US (88 percent of employees in Germany) describe themselves as emotionally detached in their jobs, primarily because of poor relationships with their boss or colleagues. Employees who feel dissatisfied and powerless to change have, in effect, become hostages.

The fear of conflict and ineffective conflict management strategies cause employees to settle into a state of helplessness similar to what hostages feel. Yet there are ways leaders can influence others to feel empowered.

You tend to avoid conflict because your brain is hardwired to avoid potential danger. However, you can learn to do what is counter-intuitive—to step toward conflict instead of stepping back into passivity. Conflict must be seen as a challenge, a problem to be solved, an opportunity—something positive.

The techniques of hostage negotiators provide a powerful framework for managers to use in any situation where people are not functioning at their best. What managers can learn from hostage negotiators:

Create and maintain a bond even if there is not a natural liking of one another. Keep a positive state by focusing on constructive outcomes and on common goals regardless of any desire to defend, attack, or give up. Use this positive state to influence the other(s) into a cooperative relationship for finding productive solutions. Manage emotions by focusing the mind's eye in the brain on positive outcomes to see the *benefits* beyond the pain, loss, and frustration. Use questions rather than telling to overcome resistance, to invite a change of mindset, and to focus on the benefits. Address problems with honesty, authenticity, directness, and genuine concern for the dignity of others. Use the law of reciprocity and appropriate concession-making to build trust. Help the other person save face by offering

choices and encouraging self-regulation. Use dialogue to gain understanding, to discover new information, and to maintain social bonding. Learn to use yourself as a secure base to create trust and confidence to explore creative solutions.

Dialogue is an essential tool to develop a climate of collaboration—a powerful combination of listening and talking. The process of dialogue starts with an attachment and a bond between two or more people and the most important sign of dialogue is how mutual influence occurs in the process. If I do not let you touch me, influence me, change me, then I am not in a dialogue. Dialogue requires a mindset of discovery where thinking together leads to creating something new—a seeking of a greater truth beyond what each participant has alone.

Many leaders find it is easier to get into a debate or an argument. The exchanges usually go on too long with too many details and end in frustration. Effective dialogue is measured by the depth of understanding, the degree of mutual influence, and the quality of new ideas generated rather than the time spent talking.

Primary Blocks to Dialogue

There are four blocks to dialogue:

1. Passivity. This is when a person displays and uses language of withdrawal or non-responsive behavior. The focus of the person is on inhibiting himself or herself rather than engaging in problem-solving behavior.

2. Discounting. When people say something to minimize, maximize, disrespect, or put down another person or themselves, they are discounting.

3. Redefining. This involves not answering a question or changing the focus of the transaction by avoiding something that may be uncomfortable or emotional. If this continues, the dialogue shifts away from the point being discussed. People appear to *talk past* each other and not *with* each other, or they simply go in circles. The original point may even be forgotten.

4. Over-detailing. The dialogue does not proceed because the person gives excessive detail, overwhelming others

with too much information, and the important point is lost or hidden. It can also be recognized by exhaustion in listening to the speaker.

Secondary Blocks to Dialogue

There are six secondary blocks to dialogue. These may or may not occur in conjunction with one of the primary blocks.

1. Being too rational. Conversation is conducted too analytically, without any personal warmth, emotion, or bonding. It discounts the feelings connected to the topic.

2. Being too emotional. This is when an emotion such as anger, sadness, or fear takes over in the dialogue and the person stops thinking clearly about the subject. Emotions drive the person to say and do things he or she later regrets.

3. Over-generalizing. If someone takes a small piece of truth and exaggerates it to an extreme or absurdity, they are over-generalizing—making statements that are meaningless, overwhelming, and lacking in relevance. Such statements often involve the words *always* or *never*.

4. Abstraction. This occurs when the conversation moves too far off subject and the focus and thought are lost. Ideas and concepts are not connected to a specific incident, are disconnected from reality, or are too philosophical.

5. Lack of directness. This means avoiding an issue or problem, or talking around the subject. The sentences are clear but avoid the topic.

6. Lack of honesty. When one or both persons are not honest with the other, then open dialogue becomes impossible. This may involve a lack of self-disclosure, distortion of true feelings, or lack of authenticity that can be reflected in a simple or a serious lie.

More than one block may exist at the same time. Be aware when you or others are blocking dialogue.

Most negotiators engage in mutual monologues and other forms of ineffective communication as reflected in meetings that are too long and boring, adding little value and making participants exhausted and frustrated.

Hostage negotiators achieve a 95 percent success rate. You can achieve similar success rates by using some of the same techniques effectively. **SSE**

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ACTION: Dialogue with your clients.

