



## From Conflict to Confidence in 48 Hours

Does the thought of confronting someone make your stomach knot? You're not alone – at least half of the American population suffers from conflict avoidance. We simply try to avoid the confrontation until the situation goes away. Unfortunately, in most circumstances, the problem doesn't go away – it gets worse.

We don't like conflict for many reasons: it can be painful, scary, unpredictable or stressful. What we need is a conflict resolution tool to use in difficult situations. The good news is that we have one; the bad news is that it begins with us.

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey coins a term called "response-ability." According to Covey, what matters most is not what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens to us. Our response-ability is the option to choose our reactions or response. This is where you come in – as a conflict situation arises, Covey contends that you have a choice of responses: to react and be angry or respond and be calm. It's the first of many choices to make that shape the outcome of your situation.

The second choice is to determine the focus of conflict for you. Webster's dictionary has many definitions for conflict. The first, and most widely used, describes conflict as "to fight, to battle, to be antagonistic or to clash." Just the thought of this one can send adrenaline blasting through your system. Consider the second, less often used, version of conflict: "to sharply disagree." Since we have choices of definitions, which version do you prefer? Most people would rather have conflict be a sharp disagreement rather than a battle – you decide. If you chose #2, now ask yourself how many times a day you disagree with someone...the point is that conflict is a natural part of our lives. Avoiding it is like trying to hold your breathe for an hour – you can't.

Your third choice is to decide what outcome you want the conflict to have. There are positive and negative outcomes and results from conflict. The negative easily come to mind: stress, hurt feelings, damaged relationships, low productivity and morale or unresolved situations. The positive outcomes sometimes surprise people: conflict can be a stress reliever, we may gain new knowledge and understanding, it can actually cause people to bond together to reach a goal or overcome an obstacle, and conflict can form stronger relationships plus resolve issues.

Let's put these three choices together: 1) how we respond to circumstances is what matters most; 2) conflict is a natural part of our lives and can be defined as a disagreement; 3) depending on our outlook, conflict can have positive results. The key is to remember these choices when you feel conflict arising or after conflict is initiated.

When you enter a conflict with a specific goal in mind, i.e., resolution or solution, it's much easier to remain calm and focused. Choosing to make conflict productive is an active goal, which requires you to refocus throughout the conversation. Refocusing allows you to stay centered on your goal and guide the conflict constructively.

The bad news about this is that practice makes permanent. To effectively reduce the amount of conflict in your life, you must address it frequently and apply these techniques. The good news is that you will decrease tension and stress by creating an environment where people feel empowered to be creative and express their honest opinions. When people feel safe and respected, they are less likely to lash out or become upset. The best news is that knowing how to make conflict productive gives you a confidence boost. Maintaining control of you is the most important step in making conflict productive.

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