Advocate Training – Hints and Tips - Arguments and Conflict

Behaviour

I have recently experienced working in a new situation outside the work environment. It has brought into focus skills I learnt early on in my career, about dealing with people. It has also highlighted to me, how individuals can have a range of attitudes and approaches. What can be important to one person can be totally irrelevant to another.

What I also noticed was how others perceive behaviour. How they can judge someone who is being forceful and assertive, putting an argument across, is seen as being in conflict. This perception can bring about distortion, because of the other persons values. I learnt a long time ago, how if you show confidence and capability, this can trigger subconscious behaviour stemming from the other persons own insecurity.

This insecurity can bring about game playing and very childish behaviour in the individual. This is their way of gaining control. It can even go back to the sort of games we played as a child such as when a child repeats back to you what you have said or plays the type of game: 'I am bigger than you are'

It can also mean that they focus upon unimportant things, whilst ignoring the important matters, as the game is the priority. In this situation you have to try to continue with assertive behaviour. It can be very hard not to react, but if you do you are entering into their game. Trying to respond is crucial and in the long term will have the best results for yourself, it will not however stop the other person trying to play the game. They are operating from a subconscious level.

The other approach can be to step back and make a tactical withdrawal, that gives you time to plan your approach. It will also mean you can engage on your own terms and in your own time.

Arguing

What you have to decide is when to argue your point. Arguing is different to having an argument, but people often confuse the two. Having an argument, where emotions are volatile, often one of the aims is to be negative. This has the objective of throwing out others' ideas. Its aim is to get the other person to react, because of the very negative behaviour. Negative behaviour generates a negative mood which limits our perceptions. Winning or losing becomes the main focus rather than the issues being agreed. Negative attitudes get individuals nowhere.

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If I want to argue a point then I am going to give reasons, facts or information. This will enhance and support an idea, action, or theory. Typically this has the aim of persuading others to share one's view. At the same time I will listen to their point of view. That way we can confront the issue and come up with a joint solution. If you argue constructively it can have a positive outcome.

Where does it go wrong, how can arguments be so destructive? When you are making a point, if you don't stay constructive and assertive, then the situation can deteriorate. It can then become the type of discussion where we are expressing opposite views. If we then get an emotional response it can then become heated or angry, It then no longer becomes an argument but a disagreement.

In this situation, being right becomes one of the key important factors. Anybody can construct a reasonable argument for their point of view, however they become entrapped in their position if they believe they are right. It is not difficult to be right; you select your information, you leave things out, you use certain words, oppose the others and put them down.

Disagreement

There are a variety of reasons why people disagree, mainly because they see things differently, they want different things, their personal thinking styles or values, and because they feel they are supposed to.

They See Things Differently – individuals will always have opposite views, if there are also a lack of the same values, then it is usually inevitable that there will be strong disagreement.

Mood - The way we feel at a particular time can have an effect on the way we see things. It may be that we can't define what our mood is or why we are acting that way. Often, we deliberately switch moods for effect.

Context - How we see things and the context we put something into from our point of view.

View - Some people are incapable or unwilling to take a wider view and look at a fuller picture.

Logic - What someone seems to be logical and right doesn't always seem logical to somebody else.

Information - The amount of information someone has available to them or their knowledge on a subject.

Experience - Whether you have experience of a situation.

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Prediction - A mixture of experience and information so that we can predict how something might happen.

They key approach is where possible stay assertive and in control. Make sure where possible respond and lessen reaction. Remember they aren't going to change, you have to change your response to them.

Values, Styles and Beliefs

One area where conflict can arise is when the other person has different core values. This can cause major issues in a relationship and will often lead to immediate disagreement. Unless a working relationship can be established, it will inevitably lead to conflict.

Values

If you have very different values, this can create arguments. Fundamentally you are different types of people. When the values and behaviour of the other person are opposed to your own, it creates friction. Your own behaviour has to be very controlled and responsive to ensure that you do not react to their opposing values.

Values are at the core of your behaviour, so opposition to your values, can have a profound impact. Long term this can easily result in conflict and sometimes you may not be aware that the conflict has started through this opposition.

As children some parents will encourage, especially boys, to fight and be strong. Not to back down or show weakness. To be the winner not the vanquished, that way you are seen to be strong and powerful. If you are unable to see the other point of view, acquiesce or compromise, relationships will deteriorate.

Style

Everybody has a particular style and others perception of this style can create a polarising of opinions. Styles come from a variety of areas:

Thinking Styles

How we think about a situation and the way we make a decision. Whether we base our thinking on logic or feelings and intuitions. I know my own intuitive approach to thinking, can sometimes drive those who base their thinking entirely on logic, into conflict. To them my intuition can be seen as irrational.

Our thinking style can also relate back to our values, what we consider to be right or wrong.

Word Based

Words can become laden with emotional values. Often new concepts cannot be launched because we don't have the appropriate words. If we struggle to find the right words, this can cause frustration. If we use the wrong words, this can be seen as intimidating or bullying, it can also create ambiguity and misinterpretation

Words and names do hurt, despite what the nursery rhyme says. We need to ensure that our words do not cause conflict and disruption.

Differing Opinions

This situation only becomes an argument, and therefore a conflict, (rather than a discussion) when one or more of the people involved either:

i)   confuse opinion and fact,
ii)   refuse to allow an individual to hold a particular opinion,
iii)   are unable or unwilling to give valid reasons for the opinion held,
iv)   consider that the opinion of the other will affect them beyond acceptable limits.

Polarisation

People put themselves in their own little boxes and are unprepared to move. This can stem from beliefs, our values or a particular viewpoint. What we judge to be true or false. We use fact, ideas, opinions, arguments and information to back up our own point of view.

We deliberately search out contradictions to help our process of thinking. We become rigid in our processing and do not think freely.

Beliefs and Principles

People's beliefs or values can manifest themselves in their own personal principles. They believe in the idea of a right and wrong or good and bad. They are tied up with their principles or lack of principle.

Conflict Positions

One would assume that generally most people in a position of conflict would want to resolve their problems. They have interests at stake and they started

it. Generally those in this position are the worst to try and solve the problem. There are various characteristics of conflict and some of these positions are:

- **Tension and Hostility -** There is little or no communication and any that there is will not be trusted. If one side suggests something, the other regards it as a trick. Often both sides recognise that effort is being wasted but neither is prepared to make the first move. There is no give and take as giving anything is seen as surrender.

- **Secrecy, Suspicion and Mistrust -** At every moment the other side is going to do something to take advantage. There is lots of psychological maneuvering; secrets and information are withheld.

- **Lack of Communication -** There is an absence of good communication and often a loss of contact.

- **Position Taking -** People make their position and keep there, often by making statements or proclamations.

- **Labels -** Labels are assigned to the opposition, giving them an identity and to show how bad they are.

- **Enjoyment -** People enjoy issues and often a conflict can hide other issues.

- **Internal View -** People can't see the wood for the trees. They become bigoted and have an inward way of looking at things. Their positions dominate and become the main point of discussion.

There are a variety of ways we can resolve conflict and produce positive outcomes; we will look at some if these aspects:

Benefits - We trade benefits to both sides so that we can remove fears and allay problems. We get each party to offer something to the other, or we create a joint situation that will produce benefits for both sides. We can also offer rewards for fulfilling the benefits.

Lateral Thinking - We are prepared to move towards the other's idea and think through their ideas. Looking at things in a different way we are able to see the other's view. We are able to accept others' ideas and try to test them out. We try to look at things from a logical point of view.

Third Party - This is to introduce a triangular approach rather than two dimensional, which should lead to a positive outcome. The third party should be an integral part of the process. It should enable the parties involved in the

conflict to stop getting bogged down in tradition and complacency. They do not have the skills or motivation to think laterally.

Oil and water do not mix, and the introduction of an emulsifier can result in the mix of the two. The third party can work as the emulsifying agent; they enables the two to work together in an agreeable manner. they has to remove hostile moods and attitude. they can also stop trivial matters getting in the way and stop them from slipping back into hostility.

The third party can also set the stages and agenda. they can make things stick to the point and discipline proceedings. The agenda is set by the third party and the others don't like it – that's tough. The third party gets the others to think in particular ways and look at things logically. Compliance is asked for repeatedly and until it happens or failure to do so is made viable.

There has to be focus on particular points to keep on track and to remind the others of the focus. When discussion gets bogged down, the third party restarts it by shifting attention or putting in other ideas. Also, calling a break can lead to relieving tension and difficulty. Often, when something has come to a conclusion or a resolution has been arrived at, then this discussion needs to be cut off. Often an idea can be put forward through the third party to promote positive discussion.

He should also notice ideas and harvest them, even apparently trivial ones. These can then be explored and the benefits exploited. they can be objective and take a positive stance. they can also take an overview and look at things in perspective. they can see the wood for the trees. From this point,they should be able to make connections and see how one matter joins with another. they can also point out where the parties really do have something in common. Aims can be reconciled; bridges can be built.

The needs to be awareness about the state of conflict and point out the concepts that are under discussion. they should be able to provide alternatives, suggestions and ideas. To do this, the third party needs to be creative. Once of the most important factors is to gain acceptance and to modify suggestions so that they are acceptable. The third party needs to be effective and entrepreneurial, have skill and flair. Above all,they needs to be creative and be able to bring people together.

Objectives and benefits - People's perspectives need to be established to identify what they are trying to achieve. What benefit do they wish to gain from the conflict, and do they have any particular objectives? Once these are established, it should be easier to address the real issues.

Perceptions - Often this is at the bottom of the conflict; we see and perceive things differently. Often we need to accommodate all views – thus we can work our way forward.

Commonality - We need to focus on agreement rather than disagreement. We need to establish and focus on common points and ideas.

Shift Perception - This is a very effective mechanism, and it is where we get someone to see something in a different way. This is often done by getting them to think laterally and logically. It is unrealistic to believe that this will happen suddenly; it takes time and patience.

Breakdown - As far as possible, break the conflict down into sub-elements. Look at the ingredients, objectives, positions, values, personalities, anything that you consider important. Once you have broken things down, then reconstruct them into an effective design.

Conflict Point - Establish the central conflict point but leave it alone. This is to stop entrenchment happening and resolve issues around that point. If you take this approach, it is likely that the central point will resolve itself as the others are solved.

Work Backwards - Start with the end point and work back from this issue. Look at the issues that got you to the position where you are, and resolve and establish the points. By looking at each of these issues, we can establish the real perspective of the problem. Identify what you really want to happen, and what it would be like.

Blocks - Do not define boundaries and conditions at the start. These only get in the way of the true process. It makes it impossible to produce a positive outcome.

If you use at least a few of these techniques it will help you resolve any conflict. If you do find yourself in a conflict situation, analyse the situation and identify the correct approach for a resolution.