

To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #28

Title: *Resolving Conflict*

During my many years working with teachers and principals in the Madison School District, I was called upon to help facilitate situations where there were conflicts among staff. Sometimes the issues seemed so small, like how a fellow teacher was handling the organization of a field trip or who had priority using a piece of audiovisual equipment, and sometimes, the issues seemed really big, like disagreements on how to handle angry parents or how the library was to be used. Yet, regardless of the issue, these conflicts were still barriers to staff being able to work together in positive ways.

What I learned during that time is that often the reason for the conflict had nothing to do with the actual situation that was in front of us. It also had to do with how teachers felt about making changes, and why they believed what they did about a particular set of circumstances. I knew that I needed to learn more about conflict and how to resolve it in ways that people were heard, and that brought resolution to the particular area of stress in the school.

What I want to offer here are some ideas about conflict for you to mull over, ideas that might apply not only to your current situation, but also to how you interact with your friends and family on the outside. If one idea is useful to you, dig in deeper to see why it has importance for you and how you might act differently.

Making changes is hard and can lead to conflict among friends, colleagues, and family. Here are some reasons why people might resist change:

- LOSS OF CONTROL
- EXCESS UNCERTAINTY
- WE DON'T LIKE SURPRISES
- FAMILIARITY IS COMFORTABLE
- LOSS OF FACE
- SELF-DOUBT--CAN I DO IT?
- RIPPLE EFFECT—WHAT ELSE WILL I NEED TO CHANGE?
- MORE WORK
- PAST RESENTMENTS
- SOMETIMES CHANGE CREATES WINNERS AND LOSERS

~Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Harvard University

Think about what is hard for you in making changes. Which reasons from the above list resonate for you? Because of our own life experiences, each individual's list will probably be different. But, recognizing what is hard for each of us doesn't necessarily help when we are faced with conflict. Often, each of us has a position that we hold onto and it's hard to listen and hear what the other person wants or needs...and they probably have just as hard a time hearing what we need.

Clarifying our own needs is an important first step. When confronted with an issue, we often allow our **position**—how we think about our own or another person’s attitudes, behaviors, or interests—to take precedent over our **needs**. But, successfully navigating conflict requires that we focus on **needs** (our own and those of others) and try to move away from the **positions** that get in our way of resolving the issue.

Here is more description of the POSITION VS. NEED MODEL:

Position:

- Our opening demands
- Can often be posturing or blaming the other side as a way to protect our position
- Strongly held belief that it is the best way to get our needs or interests met
- Clashes with the other side that frames the conflict

EXAMPLE: “This isn’t fair. I should have gotten that job. I deserved it.”

Needs:

- The reason we are negotiating
- Specific to the conflict
- Can be tangible or psychological
- Must be satisfied to have a stable outcome

EXAMPLE: “I really wanted to be chosen for that job so that I am recognized for all the hard work that I’ve put in and demonstrate the progress that I’ve made.”

It doesn’t usually matter which of the parties reframes the discussion. You can help the other person identify the needs that you hear from them. Reframing changes the climate from a competitive struggle to collaborative problem-solving.

I think that the single most important thing I learned doing conflict resolution with educators was asking the question, **WHAT DO YOU NEED?** It changes the whole conversation and allows people to move off of their positions and truly listen to each other. When you satisfy the needs of both sides, people are much more likely to make changes that they might have resisted in the past.

You might hear: *I need recognition for this work...I need time to understand the situation better...I need to not lose my standing in this group...I need more financial security.*

Perhaps you are living with a conflict that is stressful and taking up a lot of your negative energy. Think about the example above and perhaps talk with others, as you take steps to better understand the **Position vs. Needs model**. Clarifying your needs (and those of others) might make your interactions less confrontational, more positive, and more satisfying.

~ Ms. Caro-Bruce