

# **Without These Three Skills You May Fail At Conflict Management**

**By Dr. Rick Voyles**

Almost no one enjoys conflict. Everyone tries to avoid it. In fact, we work hard to master conflict avoidance skills. We teach our kids in school not to get into fights, avoid disagreements, walk away, give in or give up. We socialize young girls and adult women to value the relationship above their own personal interests or needs.

As a result we are an intimacy starved culture. We raise children who do not know how to manage their anger, or productively deal with conflict. Where do our children learn how to fight, when to fight and what is worth fighting for? I may be the calmest most peaceful person on the planet, but that does not mean those around me are. Where do I learn the skills to handle their confrontation of me?

I am an expert on conflict. Most perceive me as a peacemaker. I am hired to enter into contexts of conflict and provide direction, clarity, and opportunities for resolution. I am also hired to train people. Most see training to be a tool used as a means to prevent conflict. The thought is, “with conflict skills training, people will be able to stay out of conflict.” This is probably one of two of the biggest misconceptions in the conflict management field. Conflict skills training is designed to provide people with skills to utilize when faced with conflict, not prevent it. Conflict management skills are useless if there is no conflict. Conflict management skills promote positive outcomes to disputes, not conflict prevention.

Conflict management consists of three different skill sets: communication skills, negotiation skills, and resolution skills. All three are necessary and indispensable elements for the conflict management practitioner.

## **Communication Skills Do Not Resolve Conflicts**

The second largest misconception in conflict management is that better communication skills resolve conflict. This misconception is indicative of the fact that 98% of all conflict management training on the market today consists of communication skills training. It is no wonder we are unable to manage conflict either in our personal or our professional settings. Communication skills without negotiation skills and resolution skills does not work, resulting more often than not, with practitioners breaking the back of their communication skills by expecting this skill set to do something it was never designed to do.

Communication skills are designed to keep the door of communication open. That is all. Because you cannot resolve a conflict with someone you are not talking to, your communication skills become an important component in the conflict practitioner’s tool kit. The next two skill sets of the trilogy, negotiation and resolution skills are necessary to take you across the threshold of the door your communication skills kept open for you.

Communication skills were not designed to do what negotiation and resolution skills do. The conflict practitioner must be training in all three skill sets in order to succeed.

Very few people ever get negotiation training. As a result, I see most people in conflict fall into persuasion tactics rather than exercise negotiation skills. Tactics like: threat, punish, shame, guilt and indifference. Persuasion tactics often escalate conflict, driving parties farther away from any potential for positive outcomes.

When used effectively, resolution and negotiation skills blend together and look like a single skill set. They are not. Two components of resolution separate it from negotiation skills training: need exploration and development of the self determination perspective. Negotiation training without resolution skills is simply a contract or salary negotiation model. A resolution skill without negotiation training is more like an arbitration model. Judges and arbitrators resolve conflicts. They do not need, nor do they employ, negotiation skills. Mediation employs all three skills sets of the conflict practitioner.

Negotiation skills can be taught, but not all negotiations are negotiating a conflict. Truly effective conflict management skills cannot be developed without communication skills.

Communication skills can be taught, but not all good communication assumes conflict. Truly effective conflict management skills cannot be developed without communication skills.

Resolution skills can be taught, but most resolutions require no respect for self determination. Truly effective conflict management skills cannot be developed without resolution skills.

Most conflict management training fails to respect the nature and dynamics of conflict. It looks for quick and easy fixes, and then wonders why people cannot take their training outside of the learning environment and into their daily lives. There needs to be a lot more going on in conflict management training than preventing a fight. No one will ever achieve the potential for positive outcomes within every conflict until the power of this trilogy of skills is embraced.

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