

Make the conflict stop. Please!

Dr. Rick Voyles

There are at least two ways to eliminate conflict from our lives. One is sameness; the other is separateness. When you have a high enough degree of sameness, conflict stops. There are many ways to create togetherness, unity and sameness. We can make kids in school wear the same uniforms; we can seek out a common enemy in order to unite us; we can create systems to follow and regulate compliance to these systems; we can institute rules of conformity; we can seek out like-minded groups to align ourselves.

The goal to end all conflict is not an impossible dream. It can be done. The vision of a conflict free workplace, community, partnership, or world is easily with the grasp of our imagination. The question is: are we willing to pay the price for the reality of such a vision? Are we willing to do the work necessary for such a dream to come true?

I hope not! And here is why.

There are two fundamental forces in the universe that drive our lives. One is the force to be together. Together often gets translated in terms like unity and measured by a criteria of sameness. The classic example of this force is falling in love. Couples in love tend to minimize their difference and highlight their similarities. Sameness is attractive. “Incompatible” people tend not to date. “Incompatible” couples tend to divorce. Their difference being so strong they seek to be apart, be separate, be individual again.

On the other side of the spectrum is the second powerful force driving our lives: the force to be individual. Individual often gets translated in terms of unique and measured by a criterion of independence or self reliance. We don't want to be “pigeon-holed,” categorized, or judged and we celebrate those who do not judge others, accepting them for who they are. We want to be accepted for who we are, as we are. We want to be known, at our deepest core and loved despite this knowledge. We want to be free, independent thinkers; unique and different from those around us. Free to be who we really are.

If everyone was identical, thinking the same thoughts, liking the same things, disliking the same things, agreement would be inevitable. Discord would dissolve. Dissent would disintegrate. We would be one big happy fused and enmeshed family. Within such groups anxiety and fear increase in the midst of difference. When sameness or unity become threatened, anxiety goes up. With anxiety comes acting out and anger. Acting out and anger produce conflict. The threat of division demands a response of punishment, discipline, and sometimes even justifying abuse.

If everyone was completely separate, self sufficient individuals, free to think their own thoughts, like what they like, dislike whatever they want to dislike, without reprisal or reprimand because everyone else is also doing their own thing, equally isolated and uninterested in the interference of another, agreement would be unnecessary. Discord would dissolve. Dissent would disintegrate. We would be one big happy individual and

isolated family. Within such groups anxiety and fear increase in the midst of efforts to restrict and control. When individuality or independence become threatened, anxiety goes up. With anxiety comes acting out and anger. Acting out and anger produce conflict. The threat to our division demands a response of punishment, discipline, and sometimes even justifying abuse.

I am invited to speak on conflict to organizations, government agencies and businesses all the time. The assignment I am often given is to stop the conflict. More often than not, this assignment is more to the benefit of a teacher, a team leader, or a company manager than it is to the benefit of the workers to which I am asked to speak.

Preferring to seek a conflict free environment, some leaders propose actions that promote greater sameness or greater separateness. In some ways, some organizations unconsciously strive for a conflict free reality. In response to a vacuum of skills, leaders impose greater structure, enforce greater authority, crushes resistance with penalty and punishment out of a desire to control behavior and minimize conflict, resulting in missed opportunities and perpetuating a skill deficit throughout our conflict avoidant culture.

When Conflict Resolution Academy, LLC gets a call asking us if we do diversity training, it is often because someone, tasked with the responsibility to manage some conflict, has determined that diversity training will end the conflict. In doing so, they push an organization closer to either end of the life force spectrum, promoting either a greater freedom to be individuals or a greater need for togetherness.

Between the two extremes of these powerful forces, lies the middle. In the middle is life. However, movement away from complete sameness and complete separateness requires of us an ability to maintain and manage difference. Movement into the middle requires of us an ability to accept and control our anxiety and fear. Anxiety and fear are a part of life. We will never be able to successfully live together in the middle without conflict skills. Therefore life requires, not the elimination of conflict, but an invitation to conflict. God forbid we would ever be able to completely eliminate difference making everyone exactly the same. God forbid we would ever succeed being completely free individuals. I get anxious just thinking about such attempts.

The heart of diversity skills is differentiation, not freedom from difference, anxiety or conflict. Conflict skills training is not the antidote to the conflict caused by difference. Difference and conflict are inevitable if we are to discover life in the middle, within the power of the two life forces. Conflict skills can bring forth life within the heart of difference. When we learn to handle conflict productively rather than seek to eliminate it, we will be better able to find life within our differences.

Dr. Rick V.