MODULE 4 – CONFLICT SOLVING

**M4.WS9 - CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: MANAGING EMOTIONS AND CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK**

**How to control your emotions during a difficult conversation**

* **Breathe.** When you start noticing yourself getting tense, try to focus on breathing. This will take your attention off the physical signs of panic and keep you centred.
* **Focus on your body.** Sitting still when you’re having a difficult conversation can make the emotions build up rather than dissipate. Standing up and walking around helps to activate the thinking part of your brain.
* **Acknowledge and label your feelings**. To distance yourself from the feeling, [label it](https://hbr.org/2016/11/3-ways-to-better-understand-your-emotions). Call a thought a thought and an emotion an emotion. “He is so wrong about that and it’s making me mad” becomes “I’m having the thought that my co-worker is wrong, and I’m feeling angry”.
* **Take a break.** The more time you give yourself to process your emotions, the less intense they are likely to be. So [when things get heated](https://hbr.org/2016/01/defusing-an-emotionally-charged-conversation-with-a-colleague), you may need to excuse yourself for a moment – get a cup of coffee or a glass of water, go to the bathroom, or take a brief stroll around the office.

**How to reduce emotional reactions during conflict**

***Strategies to handle negative emotions***

*There are several approaches you can use to reduce the negative emotions in yourself and others during conflict. Here are some ideas and phrases you can use:*

*1. Delay: “Let’s talk about it later when we have more time to think it through.”*

*2. Lower expectations: “I know you won’t like this but I think we need to talk about it anyway.”*

*3. Start with the positive: “You are very good at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ however, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .*

*4. Sit at the same side of the table. This reduces the psychological barrier of the table and opens up the communication.*

*5. Break the tension by being relaxed and personal: “I am so glad we are talking about this”, “You are really someone I trust to work this through with.”*

*6. Include commonalities and points of agreement as you are discussing the differences: “You are right we do need to work on \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”, “It is also getting clear from this conversation that we are doing pretty well with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”*

*7. Acknowledge their difficulty: “I see that this is a challenge for you”, “I hear that you are having a hard time with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_”*

*8. Take responsibility for your part in the problem, if there is any: “I see now how I am contributing to this by doing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”*

*9. Take responsibility for solving the problem: “Next time I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”*

*10. Apologize, if necessary. “I am so sorry I’ve created this problem”, “I apologize for inadvertently creating such reactions.”*

***Counter-productive Conflict Beliefs***

*What comes first, thoughts or feelings? The research on emotional intelligence shows that thoughts come first. Imagine someone you don’t like walks into your office, and you have a feeling of dread or stress. If you track back what you were thinking when they walked in, you will see that you had a negative thought such as “Oh no”, or “I don’t want to deal with this right now”.*

*Our thoughts can be our own worst enemy during conflict. Some thoughts: beliefs that we have found to interfere with resolving conflict include:*

*\*It may resolve itself – Creates a delay in resolving the issue and may build a bigger problem*

*\*It is not important enough – Minimizes the person and issue, which may come back to haunt you.*

*\*He will never understand – This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy*

*\*It is useless*

*\*It is not me – it is my boss’s job to handle this*

*\*That is always someone in government workshops tells me – we can’t have that conversation here – the union – they won’t listen – when you probe you find out they can, it is just hard work and they don’t want to do it.*

**Constructive feedback**

Constructive feedback is providing **useful comments and suggestions** that contribute to a positive outcome, a better process, or improved behaviours. It **provides encouragement, support**, corrective measures and direction to the person receiving it. Knowing how to give constructive feedback is a valuable skill.

**Feedback is often confused with criticism**, but feedback should NOT be viewed as a personal assault or a list of errors, mistakes, or mishaps. While the content of the feedback can be negative, its delivery can always be constructive.

There are TWO main elements that make feedback constructive:

1. The content of the feedback: Constructive feedback is specific, issue-focused (rather than a value judgement about the individual) and based on what is observable (rather than assuming anything about the person's attitude or motivation). It also includes some specific direction on how to make improvements (where needed).
2. How the feedback is delivered: To be constructive, feedback should not be delivered in a way that provokes hurt feelings, shame, defensiveness, resistance, or a sense of failure. Honest does not mean tactless.

**How to deliver constructive feedback**

* Provide positive feedback rather than negative
* Be specific
* Focus on what can be changed
* Provide details
* Allow the other person to accept or reject your feedback
* Offer alternatives
* Describe rather than judge
* Respect other's feelings, opinions and beliefs
* Make sure the other person listens to you and understands you correctly
* Ask if they agree with your feedback or not
* Ask them to suggest alternative forms of behaviour
* Ask them to specify what they intend to do differently
* Ask them to consider the consequences if they do not act on feedback

**The most effective feedback (Bailey and Hargrove)**

* **Objective**. Keep your personal feelings toward the person at bay. Even if you’re not pleased about the situation, any hostility in your tone could cause the recipient to automatically shut down or become defensive.
* **Timely**. Don’t wait a month to say something you should have said immediately after the fact. Feedback should follow quickly after an event while it’s still fresh and clearly referenceable.
* **Constructive**. Show you respect the receiver and that you’re giving feedback with their best interests in mind.
* **Actionable**. Feedback must include advice that the receiver can translate into immediate next steps, rather than telling them what they’ve done wrong just for the sake of getting it off your chest. Help them set up measurable performance indicators based on your feedback that they can track of moving forward.
* **Warranted**. It can be difficult as a leader to avoid micromanaging, but it’s crucial that you don’t give feedback on every decision or action your employees make. Give them the space to make mistakes and learn from them.

**Activity:** *Use this information and prepare constructive feedback on behaviours that you do not consider appropriate at your workplace.*

