

## **The Root of All Conflict**

### **by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Can you believe a single three-word phrase is the basis for nearly all conflict? It is true that conflict shows up with numerous symptoms and there are many different ways of resolving it. If it were not for three words, and their implications, we would rarely experience the dysfunctional behaviors of conflict that cause interpersonal problems and billions of dollars wasted in business.

Human beings come in all shapes and sizes; each of us is a unique specimen. One universal truth we all have in common is an amazing ability to drive other humans crazy when we try to live or work in close proximity. Two people working in the same area day after day will eventually hurt each other emotionally, if not physically. Put three people together and it will happen even faster. When you peel back the various layers of symptoms, you always come back to the same three-word source of the problem.

Professional negotiators and conflict resolution consultants have hundreds of techniques to deal with the conflict problem and to try to get people to get along. Each one of us has some mixture of techniques we use, depending on the situation. Typical techniques for dealing with conflict include:

- Flight – Trying to avoid it or somehow get away from it.
- Smoothing – Trying to make everyone feel good.
- Negotiating – Finding a compromise that works. Looking for a win-win.
- Showdown – Driving for a decision. Demanding a judgment on win-lose.
- Confronting – Getting to the real issues. Finding the root cause.

In my leadership classes, I have a module on conflict reduction. I give each student a three-inch round button with the three words that are the root cause of all conflict. The words are "I AM RIGHT." In most interfaces, each person has a personal opinion of what is happening, and that opinion is invariably "right" according to the person who has

it. Reason: It is next to impossible for a person who is not insane to get his or her opinion wrong. If you believe it, then it is true for you.

If I have a disagreement with another person about a situation, the other person must be wrong by definition, because I am convinced that I am right. Few people will draw a conclusion about something believing it to be incorrect. I pass out the "I AM RIGHT" buttons to remind my leadership students that all people are, in effect, walking around each day wearing the same button. If we could only change the wording on these buttons to read, "I am not sure" or "I may be wrong," then there would be less conflict and more room for constructive dialog.

If we can teach people to soften the zeal with which they believe their opinions long enough to at least listen to the case for an alternate view, then we can enable healthy consideration of both views and lower the level of conflict. One way the professional negotiators use to get people to do this is to reverse the roles. During a heated debate, it can be useful to get person "A" to attempt to advocate the views of person "B" and vice versa. That technique is easier said than done.

I recall having a heated debate with another engineer early in my career. Neither one of us was able to convince the other person that he was wrong. Finally I said to him, "OK Frank, how about we reverse roles; I will argue your side and you argue mine." Frank was a smart negotiator. He said, "OK Bob, you go first." I then proceeded to explain why Frank's position was the correct one, then I told him it was his turn to explain my side of the story. Frank pondered for a minute, and said, "You know, Bob, after listening carefully to the description you just gave (which was actually Frank's thesis), I agree with you." He had me cold.

To lower conflict in your work area, teach individuals to recognize they are all wearing an "I AM RIGHT" button all of the time. Help people see that an alternative view is possible and should be considered. Encourage people to listen carefully to what the other person is saying and do their best to see the validity in their views.

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