

### Step 3. Identify Your Goals

Once you've defined the problem, you need to identify the goals. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish in this conflict management interaction. If you look at an interpersonal conflict as an opportunity to resolve differences and disagreements, it will be easy to identify your goals. Do you want to avoid breaking up? Do you want to have greater freedom to see others? Do you want to kiss and make up? These goals will help you move to the next step.

### Step 4. Identify and Evaluate Your Choices

In most conflicts you have choices as to how you might consider resolving the problems. Identify and evaluate these choices. For example, you might brainstorm by yourself or with your partner. Try not to inhibit or censor yourself or your partner as you generate these potential solutions. Once you have proposed a variety of choices, look especially for those that will enable each party to win—to get something he or she wants. Avoid win-lose solutions, in which one person wins and one loses. Such outcomes will cause difficulty for the relationship by engendering frustration and resentment. Carefully weigh the costs and the rewards that each choice entails. Most choices will involve costs to one or both parties. Seek solutions in which the costs and the rewards will be evenly shared.

Using a specific example will help us work through the remaining steps in the conflict management process. In this example, the conflict revolves around Pat's not wanting to socialize with Chris's friends. Chris is devoted to these friends, but Pat actively dislikes them. Chris thinks they're wonderful and exciting; Pat thinks they're unpleasant and boring.

For example, among the choices that Pat and Chris might identify are these:

1. Chris should not interact with these friends anymore.
2. Pat should interact with Chris's friends.
3. Chris should see these friends without Pat.

Clearly choices 1 and 2 are win-lose solutions. In choice 1, Pat wins and Chris loses; in 2, Chris wins and Pat loses. Choice 3 has some possibilities. Both might win and neither must necessarily lose. This potential choice, then, needs to be looked at more closely.

### Step 5. Act on the Selected Choice

You might want first to "act" on the choice mentally. How does it feel now? How will it feel tomorrow? Are you comfortable with it? In the previous example, will Pat be comfortable when Chris socializes with these friends alone? Some of Chris's friends are attractive; will Pat be jealous? Will Chris give people too much to gossip about? Will Chris feel guilty? Second, act on the choice. Put the chosen choice into operation (as a temporary measure, if you prefer).

### Step 6. Evaluate the Choice

The next step is to evaluate the choice once it has been put into operation. How did it work? Did the choice resolve the conflict? Is the situation better now than it was before? Pat and Chris now need to share their perceptions of this possible solution. Would they be comfortable with this solution on a monthly basis? Is the solution worth the costs each will pay? Are the costs and rewards evenly distributed? Might other solutions be more effective?

If the selected choice works, then you move to the last step. If the selected choice doesn't work, then you need to re-enter the conflict resolution process at some point—perhaps you need to redefine the problem or look for other possible choices.



Critical-thinking pioneer Edward deBono (1987) suggests that in analyzing problems, you use six “thinking hats” as a way of seeking different perspectives. With each hat you look at the problem from a different angle.

- *The fact hat* focuses attention on the facts and figures that bear on the problem. For example, how can Pat learn more about the rewards that Chris gets from the friends? How can Chris learn why Pat doesn't like these great friends?
- *The feeling hat* focuses attention on the emotional responses to the problem. How does Pat feel when Chris goes out with these friends? How does Chris feel when Pat refuses to meet them?
- *The negative argument hat* asks you to become the devil's advocate. How may this relationship deteriorate if Chris continues seeing these friends without Pat or if Pat resists interacting with Chris's friends?
- *The positive benefits hat* asks you to look at the upside. What are the opportunities that Chris's seeing friends without Pat might yield? What benefits might Pat and Chris get from this new arrangement?
- *The creative new idea hat* focuses on new ways of looking at the problem. In what other ways can Pat and Chris look at this problem? What other possible solutions might they consider?
- *The control of thinking hat* helps you analyze what you're doing; it asks you to reflect on your own thinking. Have Pat and Chris adequately defined the problem? Are they focusing too much on insignificant issues? Have they given enough attention to possible negative effects?

### Step 7. Wrap It Up

Even after the conflict is resolved, there is still work to be done. Often, after one conflict is supposedly settled, another conflict will emerge—because, for example, one person feels that he or she has been harmed and needs to retaliate in order to restore a sense of self-worth (Kim & Smith, 1993). So it's especially important that the conflict be resolved and not be allowed to generate other, perhaps more significant conflicts.

Learn from the conflict and from the process you went through in trying to resolve it. For example, can you identify the fight strategies that merely aggravated the situation? Do you or your partner need a cooling-off period? Can you tell when minor issues are going to escalate into major arguments? Does avoidance make matters worse? What issues are particularly disturbing and likely to cause difficulties? Can they be avoided?

Keep the conflict in perspective. Be careful not to blow it out of proportion to the extent that you begin to define your relationship in terms of conflict. Avoid the tendency to see disagreement as inevitably leading to major blowups. Conflicts in most relationships actually occupy a very small percentage of the couple's time, and yet in recollection they often loom extremely large. Also, don't allow the conflict to undermine your own or your partner's self-esteem. Don't view yourself, your partner, or your relationship as a failure just because you had an argument or even lots of arguments.

Attack your negative feelings. Negative feelings frequently arise after an interpersonal conflict. Most often they arise because one or both parties used unfair fight strategies to undermine the other person—for example, personal rejection, manipulation, or force. Resolve to avoid such unfair tactics in the future, but at the same time let go of guilt and blame toward yourself and your partner. If you think it would help, discuss these feelings with your partner or even a therapist. Apologize for anything you did wrong. Your partner should do likewise; after all, both parties are usually responsible for the conflict (Coleman, 2002).

Increase the exchange of rewards and cherishing behaviors to demonstrate your positive feelings and to show you're over the conflict and want the relationship to survive and flourish.