



## Conflict Management Tools

### Active Listening

Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. Often when people talk to each other, they don't listen attentively. They are often distracted, half listening, half thinking about something else. When people are engaged in a conflict, they are often busy formulating a response to what is being said. They assume that they have heard what their opponent is saying many times before, so rather than paying attention, they focus on how they can respond to win the argument.

Active listening is a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. The listener must take care to attend to the speaker fully, and then repeats, in the listener's own words, what he or she thinks the speaker has said. The listener does not have to agree with the speaker--he or she must simply state what they think the speaker said. This enables the speaker to find out whether the listener really understood. If the listener did not, the speaker can explain some more.

Often, the listener is encouraged to interpret the speaker's words in terms of feelings. Thus, instead of just repeating what happened, the active listener might add "I gather that you felt *angry* or *frustrated* or *confused* when. . . [a particular event happened]". Then the speaker can go beyond confirming that the listener understood what happened, but can indicate that he or she also understood the speaker's psychological response to it.

Active listening has several benefits. First, it forces people to listen attentively to others. Second, it avoids misunderstandings, as people have to confirm that they do really understand what another person has said. Third, it tends to open people up, to get them to say more. When people are in conflict, they often contradict each other, denying the opponent's description of a situation. This tends to make people defensive, and they will either lash out, or withdraw and say nothing more. However, if they feel that their opponent is really attuned to their concerns and wants to listen, they are likely to explain in detail what they feel and why. If both parties to a conflict do this, the chances of being able to develop a solution to their mutual problem becomes much greater.

From [www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/active.htm](http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/active.htm).

### Assertive Behaviour

- Standing up for one's rights no matter what the circumstance.
- Correcting the situation when one's rights are being violated.



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- Seeking respect and understanding for one's feelings about a particular situation or circumstance.
- Interacting in a mature manner with those found to be offensive, defensive, aggressive, hostile, blaming, attacking, or otherwise unreceptive.
- Direct, upfront, (not defensive or manipulative) behaviour. Those using assertive behaviour confront problems, disagreement, or personal discomforts head on, and their intent is unmistakable to others.
- Verbal "I" statements, where individuals tell others how they feel about a situation, circumstance, or the behaviour of others.
- Taking the risk of being misunderstood as being aggressive, abrasive, or attacking.
- Being able to protect one's rights while protecting and respecting the rights of others.
- Risk-taking behaviour that is not ruled by fear of rejection or disapproval, but is directed by the rational belief that "I deserve to stand up for my rights."
- Rational thinking and the self-affirmation of personal worth, respect, and rights.
- A healthy style in which to conduct interpersonal relationships.
- Finding a "win-win" solution in handling problems between two individuals.

From [www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/assert/assertive.html](http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/assert/assertive.html).

See also <http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20040206-000009.html>.

### Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a process for generating creative ideas and solutions through intensive and freewheeling group discussion. Every participant is encouraged to think aloud and suggest as many ideas as possible, no matter seemingly how outlandish or bizarre. Analysis, discussion, or criticism of the aired ideas is allowed only when the brainstorming session is over and evaluation session begins.

See <http://www.jpbc.com/creative/brainstorming.php> for a step-by-step guide to using this technique.

### Consensus

Consensus is mutual agreement among team members that all legitimate concerns of individuals have been addressed by the group and everyone agrees to support the decision. It is important to remember that a consensus decision does not mean that everyone agrees. It does mean that all members have had an opportunity to express their opinions and feel that they have been listened to by the group.

- **Steps to Reaching Consensus:**

First, review the meaning of consensus and the process of achieving consensus. Then agree on a targeted time period to reach consensus.

1. Identify Areas of Agreement
2. Clearly State Differences



- State positions and perspectives as neutrally as possible.
  - Do not associate positions with people. The differences are between alternative valid solutions or ideas, not between people.
  - Summarize concerns and list them.
3. Fully Explore Differences
- Explore each perspective and clarify.
  - Involve everyone in the discussion - avoid a one-on-one debate.
  - Look for the "third way": make suggestions or modifications, or create a new solution.
4. Reach Closure
5. Articulate the Decision.
- Ask people if they feel they have had the opportunity to fully express their opinions.
  - Obtain a sense of the group. (Possible approaches include "go rounds" and "straw polls".)
  - At this point, poll each person, asking, "Do you agree with and will you support this decision?"
- **Tips for Consensus Building:**
    - Do**
      - Try to get underlying assumptions regarding the situation out into the open where they can be discussed.
      - Listen and pay attention to what others have to say. This is the most distinguishing characteristic of successful teams.
      - Encourage others, particularly the quieter ones, to offer their ideas. Remember, the team needs all the information it can get.
      - Take the time needed to reach the point where everyone can agree to support the group's decision.
    - Don't**
      - Do not vote. Voting will split the team into "winners and losers" and encourage "either-or" thinking when there may be other ways. Voting will foster argument rather than rational discussion and consequently harm the team process.
      - Do not make agreements too quickly or compromise too early in the process. Easy agreements are often based on erroneous assumptions that need to be challenged.
      - Do not compete internally; either the team wins or no one wins.

From <http://www.ballfoundation.org/ei/tools/consensus/html>. There are several useful tools at this address.

### Nominal Group Technique

[From [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED\\_98.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_98.htm)]

- **Prioritizing issues and projects in a way that achieves consensus**

When a group meets, it's often the case that people who shout loudest, or those with higher status in the organization, get their ideas heard more than others. So when it comes to gaining consensus



on important decisions or priorities, how do you make sure you get true consensus and a fair decision for the group?

One technique to help with this is the Nominal Group Technique, a face-to-face group process technique for gaining consensus. A typical application is in organizational planning when a group needs to agree priorities in order to assign resources and funds.

The benefit of the technique is that the group shares and discusses all issues before evaluation, with each group member participating equally in evaluation. The evaluation works with each participant "nominating" his or her priority issues, and then ranking them on a scale of, say, 1 to 10. Nominal Group Technique is just one group process for achieving consensus.

- **How to Use the Tool:**

To use the Nominal Group Technique, use the following steps:

1. Select a group leader and group participants. (The rest of the steps assume you are the group leaders.)
2. Present the topic and objectives, usually ahead of the group meeting. Typically the objective will be to identify issues or projects that are most important to the group or your organization.
3. Ask the group members to discuss the topic, ask questions and seek clarifications.
4. Allow participants time to consider the issues and projects they believe are the most important.
5. Ask each participant to write down his or her priority issues or projects. If useful to do so, ask each group member to read aloud his or her responses, and give time to explain and elaborate on written responses.
6. Record all the group's responses on a master list or a flipchart for the group to view.
7. After all responses have been recorded, work through the responses together as a group and eliminate duplicates.
8. Now ask participants to choose their top priorities: say 5 to 10, depending on the number of issues and projects that the group needs to agree on.
9. Ask each participant to rank these in priority order.
10. Collect the group members' rankings and combine these to form a collective response – this is the group's consensus on the ranking of important issues or projects.

See <http://www.umext.maine.edu/onlinepubs/htmpubs/6105.htm> "Thinking Together: Making Better Decisions in Groups" for information and ideas about the differences between debate, discussion and dialogue, finding common ground, reaching consensus, setting ground rules, and other aspects of working together .

### **Win-Win Negotiation**

- **Finding a fair compromise**

Do you feel that someone is continually taking advantage of you? Do you seem to have to fight your corner aggressively, or ally with others, to win the resources you need? Or do you struggle to get what you want from people whose help you need, but over whom you have little direct authority? If so, you may need to brush up your win-win negotiation skills. Effective negotiation helps you to resolve



situations where what you want conflicts with what someone else wants. The aim of win-win negotiation is to find a solution that is acceptable to both parties, and leaves both parties feeling that they've won, in some way, after the event. There are different styles of negotiation, depending on circumstances.

- If you need their goodwill, then it may be appropriate to "play hardball", seeking to win a negotiation while the other person loses out. Many people go through this when they buy or sell a house – this is why house-buying can be such a confrontational and unpleasant experience.
- Similarly, where there is a great deal at stake in a negotiation, then it may be appropriate to prepare in detail and legitimate "gamesmanship" to gain advantage. Anyone who has been involved with large sales negotiations will be familiar with this.
- Neither of these approaches is usually much good for resolving disputes with people with whom you have an ongoing relationship: If one person plays hardball, then this disadvantages the other person – this may, quite fairly, lead to reprisal later. Similarly, using tricks and manipulation during a negotiation can undermine trust and damage teamwork. While a manipulative person may not get caught out if negotiation is infrequent, this is not the case when people work together routinely. Here, honesty and openness are almost always the best policies.

### Preparing for a successful negotiation...

Depending on the scale of the disagreement, some preparation may be appropriate for conducting a successful negotiation. For small disagreements, excessive preparation can be counter-productive because it takes time that is better used elsewhere. It can also be seen as manipulative because, just as it strengthens your position, it can weaken the other person's. However, if you need to resolve a major disagreement, make sure you prepare thoroughly. Using our free worksheet, think through the following points before you start negotiating:

- **Goals:** what do you want to get out of the negotiation? What do you think the other person wants?
- **Trades:** What do you and the other person have that you can trade? What do you each have that the other wants? What are you each comfortable giving away?
- **Alternatives:** if you don't reach agreement with the other person, what alternatives do you have? Are these good or bad? How much does it matter if you do not reach agreement? Does failure to reach an agreement cut you out of future opportunities? And what alternatives might the other person have?
- **Relationships:** what is the history of the relationship? Could or should this history impact the negotiation? Will there be any hidden issues that may influence the negotiation? How will you handle these?
- **Expected outcomes:** what outcome will people be expecting from this negotiation? What has the outcome been in the past, and what precedents have been set?
- **The consequences:** what are the consequences for you of winning or losing this negotiation? What are the consequences for the other person?
- **Power:** who has what power in the relationship? Who controls resources? Who stands to lose the most if agreement isn't reached? What power does the other person have to deliver what you hope for?



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- **Possible solutions:** based on all of the considerations, what possible compromises might there be?
- **Style is critical...** For a negotiation to be 'win-win', both parties should feel positive about the negotiation once it's over. This helps people keep good working relationships afterwards. This governs the style of the negotiation – histrionics and displays of emotion are clearly inappropriate because they undermine the rational basis of the negotiation and because they bring a manipulative aspect to them.

Despite this, emotion can be an important subject of discussion because people's emotional needs must fairly be met. If emotion is not discussed where it needs to be, then the agreement reached can be unsatisfactory and temporary. Be as detached as possible when discussing your own emotions – perhaps discuss them as if they belong to someone else.
- **Negotiating successfully...**

The negotiation itself is a careful exploration of your position and the other person's position, with the goal of finding a mutually acceptable compromise that gives you both as much of what you want as possible. People's positions are rarely as fundamentally opposed as they may initially appear - the other person may have very different goals from the ones you expect! In an ideal situation, you will find that the other person wants what you are prepared to trade, and that you are prepared to give what the other person wants.

If this is not the case and one person must give way, then it is fair for this person to try to negotiate some form of compensation for doing so – the scale of this compensation will often depend on the many of the factors we discussed above. Ultimately, both sides should feel comfortable with the final solution if the agreement is to be considered win-win.

Only consider win-lose negotiation if you don't need to have an ongoing relationship with the other party as, having lost, they are unlikely to want to work with you again. Equally, you should expect that if they need to fulfill some part of a deal in which you have "won," they may be uncooperative and legalistic about the way they do this.

From <http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkil/NegotiationSkills.htm> . See also <http://www.mftrou.com/support-files/win-win-negotiation.pdf> for useful information and ideas about using this technique.