

# Conflict Management

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- What is conflict?
- Model of responding
- Sources
- Core Skills
- Prevention: Setting expectations

<https://www.mentimeter.com/s/8e5283d15195290f6e70079ff21bdbd5/116cb4f6f2b1>



**Dimensions of conflict: When conflict first appears**  
**Dealing with all dimensions brings about a lasting resolution**

- **Cognitive – Perception**
  - Belief that own needs, wants, values, interests are incompatible with someone else's
- **Emotional – Feeling**
  - Emotional reaction that signifies disagreement
  - E.g., Fear, anger, sadness, bitterness, hopelessness
- **Behavioral – Action**
  - What do to express feelings, perceptions and get needs met in a way that has potential to interfere with other's needs being met



Mayer, B. S. (2012). *The dynamics of conflict: A guide to engagement and intervention*. John Wiley & Sons.

Conflict in many ways is a full body experience! In order to manage conflict effectively, all of these dimensions need to be considered and addressed. Here is an example of what happens when all dimensions are not addressed:

Story of Employee A and Employee B who had a conflict (shouting match, foul language etc.) because of various issues. The Supervisor instructs both to stop all acts of fighting and makes work arrangements to separate them both. With their conflict behavior stopped, both employees perceive themselves as victimized by the Supervisor's decision. Employee A also still feels irritated each time Employee B emails him. On the other hand, Employee B has dismissed everything as nothing personal and has stopped feeling anything about it.

In essence, the conflict still remains...it has perhaps taken a different expression but it is still there and indeed, now we have another layer of feeling victimized, misunderstood by the supervisor. The possibility for the conflict to fester and grow is increased.

## Four types of responding

- Passive
- Aggressive
- Passive-aggressive
- Assertive



<http://serenityonlinetherapy.com/assertiveness.htm>

### Passive:

Unwilling to advocate for self or share needs and opinions  
Not respond overtly to conflict or expressing anger  
Build up to explosion - > feel bad and withdraw

### Aggressive

Advocate needs in ways that “run roughshod” over others  
Dominating and controlling actions – pushing; mean; threatening

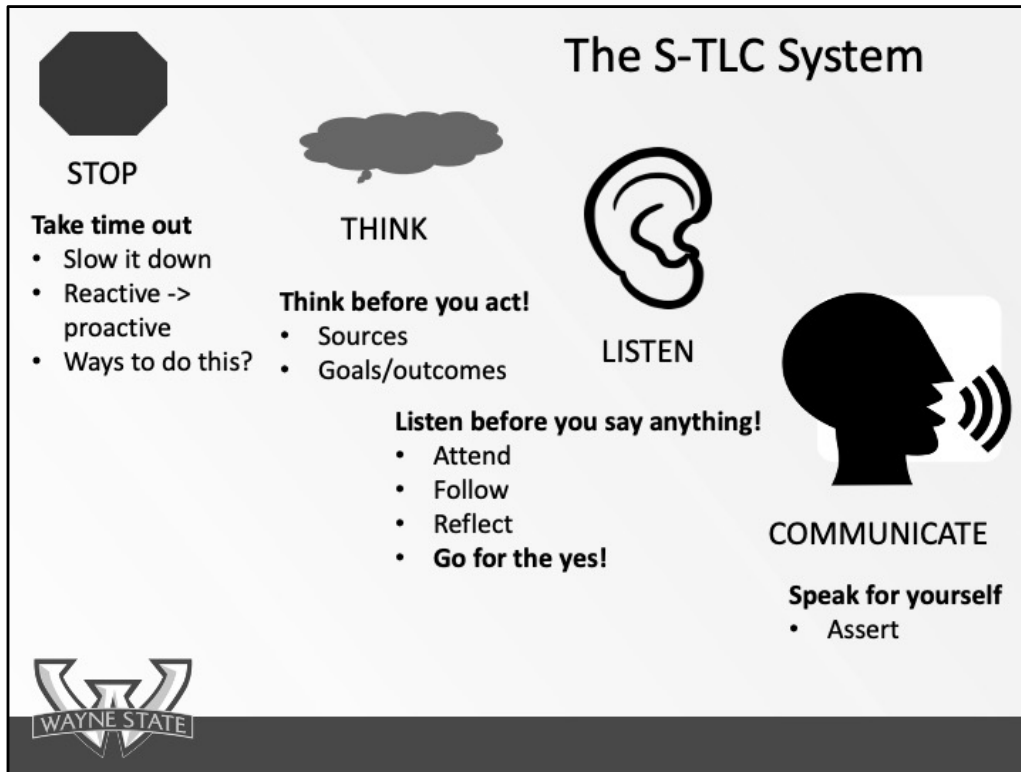
### Passive aggressive

Express anger and conflict in indirect and covert ways  
Resentful – smile while sabotaging others behind their back.

### Assertive

Advocate for self and needs in ways that support others’ needs and rights  
Respectful, calm, firm

**Assertion** is the approach that I like to promote. For some folks, this is a very comfortable style, for others it is more challenging...they are fearful of what will happen so they either respond passively, aggressively or passive-aggressively in an order to try to keep the situation “under control”. However, these styles can actually end up fueling the conflict and making it more complex as the other becomes frustrated by the responses.



Cahn, D. D., & Abigail, R. A. (2014). *Managing conflict through communication*. Boston: Pearson.

I have found it helpful to have a way of quickly capturing an approach to conflict. I like this one for its simplicity and visuals.

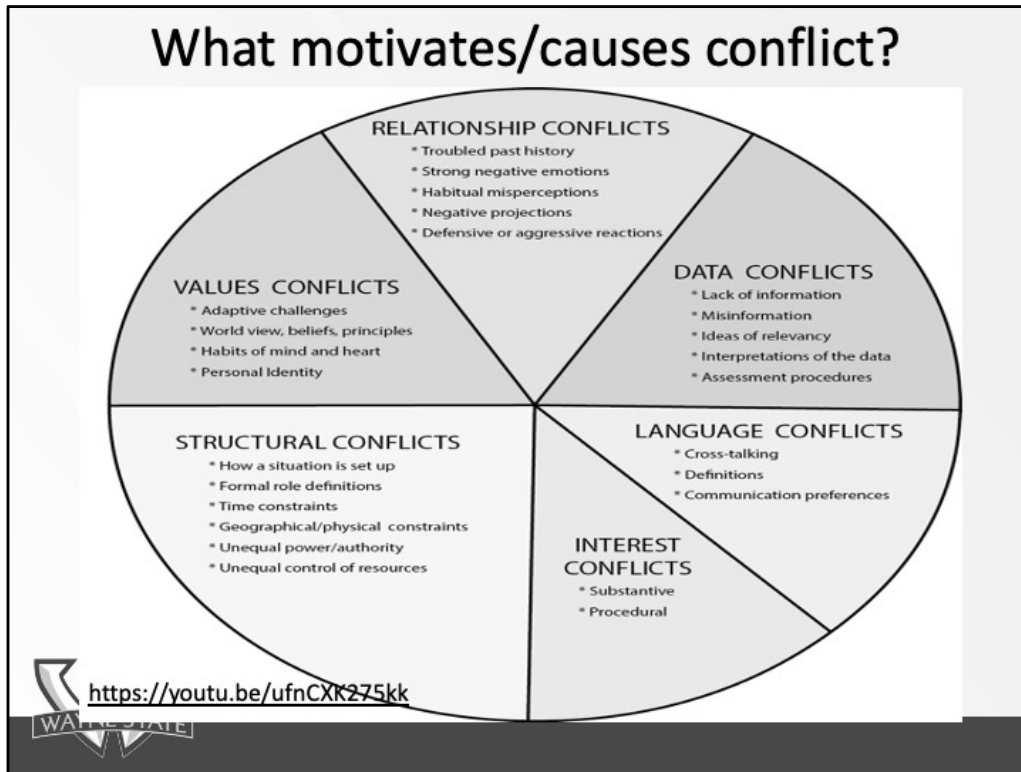
**STOP** – conflict can escalate quickly. The challenge is to slow it down, to slow yourself down to create space to think about what is going on. What are some of the ways that you “slow yourself down”?

**THINK** – once you have taken some time out, you need to think about what is going on here. Why is the conflict happening? Review possible sources (see the circle of conflict). Often we assume the conflict is due to one thing but actually is connected to something else. The only way you will learn is by being open and curious about it. Part of the identification of source is consideration of what your needs and desires are and what the needs and desires of the other are.

**LISTEN** – one you feel you can approach the other person with some sense of being centered and open, enter by listening before you share whatever your thoughts are....even if you are certain you know what this is all about! Active listening creates a space that invites the other person in to share their thoughts and concerns. See the active listening slide to note the benefits for you of doing so. One of those is that when people feel heard, i.e, that you understand what they are saying and let them know what precisely that is you understand, they are more likely to be open to hearing you....

**COMMUNICATE** – when the other feels that you understand (different than agree!) and their emotional

energy allows them to focus on you, now is your time to assert your experience and desires. See slide on assertion for steps on how to do that



Moore, C. (1996) *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*; 2nd edition, pp. 60-61.

Annie E. Casey Foundation : <https://youtu.be/ufnCXX275kk>

Getting clear about what the “cause” or source(s) of the conflict is/are (what is the problem) is critical in being able to move forward to address it with each other. Often we assume we know what the problem is and it is not accurate. Through listening and sharing our own perspective, sources often become clear and in some cases, as soon as the source is clear, so is the resolution.

Definitely check out the video as it describes how different sources of conflict are reflected in other’s and your own actions and speech. It is not unusual to have one or more components in a conflict

## Core skills for conflict management

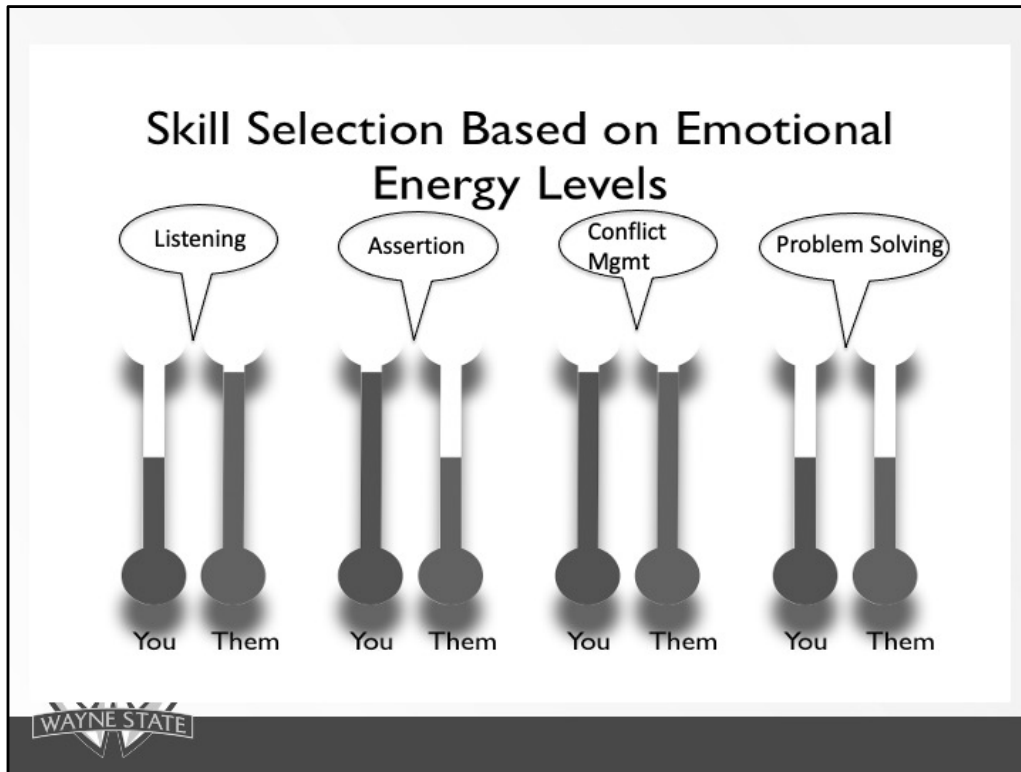
- Listening
- Assertion
- Problem-solving
- Conflict management
- Knowing when to use each skill



Bolton, R. (1986). *People skills: How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

There are some great ways and models for how to think about and approach conflict. What often is missing is “how do I actually enact those approaches”. For example, how do you actively listen? Problem-solve? Etc. That is why I LOVE this model as it breaks it down into core skills, which I think most if not all of you already know how to do. Conflict management means putting together the listening, assertion and problem-solving skills you have demonstrated elsewhere. See the slide towards the end about the process of solving a conflict, which shows where each of these core skills come into play. Spoiler alert: sometimes you have to move back and forth between listening and assertion until clarity is achieved re the things that are at issue and thus, can now work on problem-solving.

In the next few slides, there are some tips on when to use each set of skills, using level of emotional energy/intensity of the participants and then how to enact listening and assertion in particular.



Use active listening when you have enough energy and interest to engage with the other person and they are “full up” and Need to talk and tell you what they are experiencing.

Assertion is the skill when you have much to say and the other is in a place to stay engaged and to hear you.

Conflict management is when both of you have an intense need to have the other understand their experiences...this involves a combination of listening-assertion (see slide on reducing defensiveness) in an effort to help each other feel heard, the issues laid out and understood. When this happens, the intensity drops and the parties are now ready to engage in solving the issues they have identified together.



# Listening

- **Three types**
  - **Competitive or combative listening**
    - More interested in own view
    - Pretend to pay attention
  - **Passive or attentive listening**
    - Want to hear other's perspective
    - Assume that you understand (the other does not know precisely what you understand as you haven't told them)
  - **Active or reflective listening**
    - Verification before respond
    - Single most important skill



This slide helps provide a more nuanced understanding of how active or reflective listening is substantively different than other forms of listening. It is active listening that is required in conflicts. I also know how hard this can be when you have a lot of energy and want to have your say.

Why is active listening a good thing? What happens when you actively listen to someone else?

Use the chat to share your ideas



## Purposes of active listening

- Facilitate understanding; clear up misunderstanding
  - Getting information
- Identify areas of disagreement, agreement, gaps
- Help the other clarify their thoughts and feelings
- Other being heard and acknowledged...then open up to alternatives



## Purposes of active listening

- Creates good feelings between people – caring, respect
  - “One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say” - Bryant H. McGill
  - Builds rapport
- Calming effect in tough situations
  - Cooling out.



One of the least understood benefits of active listening is that if you are actually actively listening to the other person to understand their experience and perspective, you can not be doing anything else, like formulating an argument to refute their points! By focusing on the other person and wanting to understand where they are coming from, you actually get a chance to cool down, i.e., to calm down yourself, which allows you to think more clearly, which you really need in a conflict!

# Breakouts

## Groups of 3

### Speaker, Listener, Observer



I love this exercise. See the handout on how to do it.

This exercise allows us all to see how it is that active listening is communicated or not...how we know when someone is listening to us. Further it demonstrates that each of us knows how to communicate we are listening because we know what to do to show we are NOT listening!

# Listening Skill Clusters

## Attending

*Listening with your whole body*

- Posture
  - Body mvmt
  - Eye contact
  - Nondistracting env't
- ⇒ **Psychological presence**

## Following

*Staying out of the speaker's way*

- Door openers
  - Minimal encouragers
  - Infrequent questions
    - open-ended
  - Attentive silence
- ⇒ **Attentive availability**

**These behaviors convey interest and prompt the other to keep talking**



There are 3 skills clusters in listening

- Attending skills. How we show we are interested and engaged. Psychological presence with the other is communicated by what you are doing with your body and the environment around you.
- Following skills are about demonstrating you are tracking what the speaker is saying. We communicate this with encouragers (like Yes, go on, tell me more), and attentive silence
- 

Challenges in virtual environments:

1. Paraverbals can influence what gets highlighted on the screen – use head nods, Stay focused on camera lens – has the speaker experiencing you as looking directly at them. I know this is difficult if camera and video monitor are not co-located. Another thing you can do in Zoom or Team is to highlight speaker (switch from gallery to speaker mode).
2. Recognize what your face is communicating – often are not aware we have an expression that could be viewed as bored or negative (squinting; blank expression)

## Listening Skill Clusters

- **Reflecting** - *Accuracy check*
  - Reflecting content
    - Paraphrasing
    - Perception checking
  - Reflecting feelings
  - Reflecting meanings
    - Content+feeling
  - Summarizing
  - Clarifying
  - => **Understanding**
- These behaviors capture and verify the content**



The third set of skills is reflecting back what you think you have heard...you are checking for the accuracy of your understanding. The only way you and the other person know if you understand what they told you is when you can paraphrase what you heard them say, identify meanings and feelings you are picking up and sharing that with them and in essence, asking "did I get that right?" We call this "going for the yes!" When you share what you understand and the other person says "yes, that is right", then you have earned the right to speak...to share your perspective. If they say "no", stay in active listening mode and continue to share what you are hearing.

## Assertion

- **Respectfully expressing** your thoughts and feelings to another with the **purpose of influencing the behavior of that person**
- **Speaking up** for one's interests and needs in a way that **does not interfere with the interests or infringes on the rights of the other**



Once you have earned the right to speak (other feels you have understood their perspective and experience), now you can move to share yours. As noted earlier you could do that in several different ways. I want to encourage you to use assertion....you speak up for your own interests and needs and do so in a way that does not dismiss or demean the other's interests and concerns.



## The Assertion "Formula"

1. Appropriate, accurate disclosure of your feelings about the person's behavior.

"I feel \_\_\_\_\_"

2. Concrete specific description of the behavior

"When \_\_\_\_\_"

3. Description of the concrete and tangible effect of the person's behavior on you. (Impact)



"Because \_\_\_\_\_"

When you need to talk about what is going on.

Here is another handy way to think about "doing assertion" or respectively asserting your needs and information. It is about owning that it is your observation, sharing specifically what you saw and the impact on you of what they did (or didn't) do.

It is not necessary that you have these three pieces in this order but I do recommend starting with the "I" statement rather than the you of the concrete behavior description. When people here "you" as the first word out of your mouth, they often get defensive and have trouble staying focused on listening to what you have to share.

## An example

Susan, you had better start making it to meetings on time or there is going to be a serious problem. I am sick and tired of you waltzing in here whenever you feel like it. You have a bad attitude and it is causing a lot of problems around here and you need to fix it now!



[www.johnspence.com](http://www.johnspence.com)

Here is an example of how NOT to share your observations. Note the labelling of the other as the “problem” and the demand to fix it. There is not a lot of specifics here for the other to be able to understand what has happened that is a problem.

## An alternate approach

1. Susan, when you come in **late to our meeting**, I feel **frustrated** Because it has a **serious impact on keeping the agenda on track**

2. I have **noticed that you have been coming to meetings late**. I am **confused** because I know you are excited about the project we are working on. Could you help me understand what has been keeping you from making it on time?



Here are a couple of different ways to respectfully share your perspective using the "formula". Now I see that the "you" came before the "I" here when I recommended earlier to try not to lead with "you". What I think is important to consider here is that I used the person's name (recognized them as an individual) and described the behavior rather than immediately labelling it and then I "owed" it by saying I am frustrated because....

IN the second example, I do lead with I first and share what I have seen, then my feelings and open up the door to invite her to share anything that would help me understand why she is coming to the meetings after they are set to start.

## Change the statement

- You are working on a project with a group and one member is not completing their tasks on time. You have had to repeatedly finish their work, which has been very frustrating.
- A colleague who borrows books from you usually brings them back damaged. They want to borrow one again but you're feeling worried.



Here are some examples you can re-write for yourself.

## Part II: Requesting change

4. Pause for discussion – other shares perspective;  
gives explanation

5. Description of what you would like to be different  
(preferred outcome)

“I would like.....

6. Description of the concrete and tangible outcomes



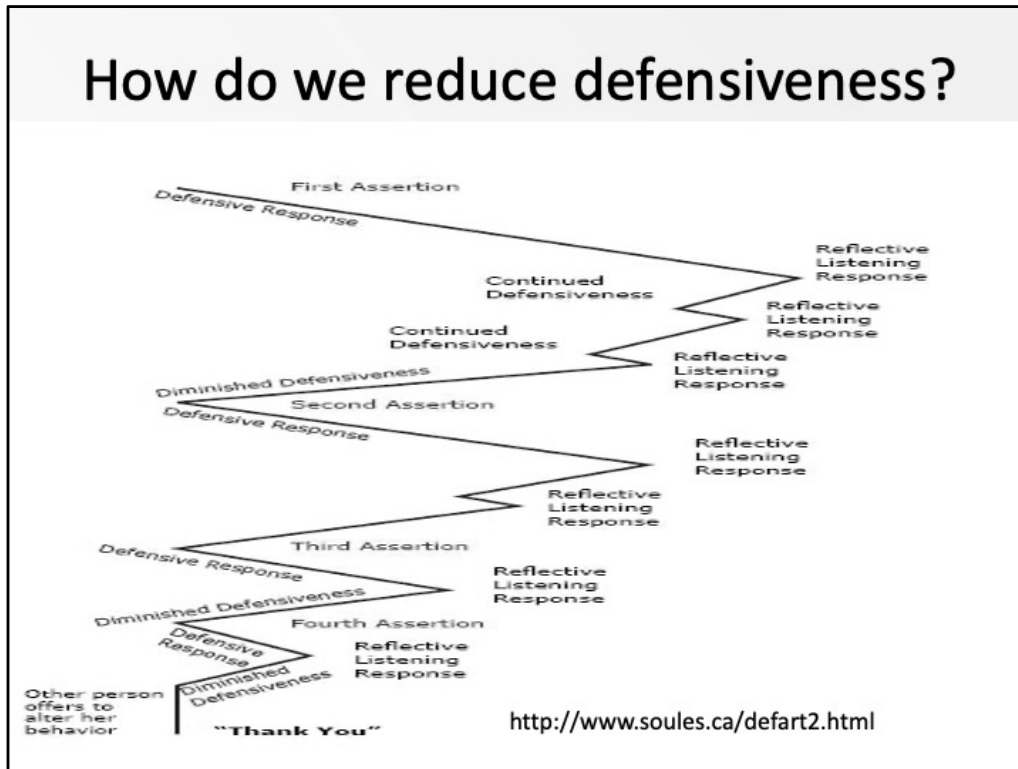
“Because .....

So Let's say that you assert and the other has listened so that you feel they have an understanding of what the issues are from your perspective. That is, you have given them the “yes”. Now open up the space to get their perspective about the why of what you have observed them doing or not doing. You may need to go back and forth a few times on this as people can feel defensive when you are telling them they did something wrong or there is a problem.

Once both of you are clearer about the issues, now is time to be clear about what you want from them. What do you want to be different? What is your preferred outcome? And why that is your preferred outcome...perhaps it helps you get your part of the project done or helps you stay in track.

These last 3 elements are about giving feedback for change.

## How do we reduce defensiveness?



As I noted earlier, when we are sharing with the other person something that is problematic, it is not unusual to expect they might become defensive. That is, there emotional energy and intensity goes up. Your best strategy there (assuming you are not at risk for physical harm) is to switch to active listening mode...they need to know you are working to understand what concerns them. You may need to go through this cycle a few times until you are both clear about the issues and can work together to resolve them (problem solving)

Sometimes, though, the other person does not become less defensive. They are too wound up to be able to hear you. At times like this, it is best to end the discussion and come back to it at another time. You could end it by listening to them again and summarizing what you have heard. You could suggest that let's each take some time to think about what we have learned and meet up again when we are both ready (then actually set that time).

One of my experiences in tough conflicts is that we tense up and we breathe shallowly, which is not good for clear thinking!. Sometimes moving will help dissolve that. So sometimes I will suggest that we go for a walk and talk. This gets people moving and thus, breathing. Also when you are walking side by side you can control your eye contact (have more or less), which can help lessen tensions. Even just suggesting a break to use the bathroom and get coffee is often enough to break the physical tension and people find their ability to think is freed up and they and you

become more open.

## Conflict Reduction

1. Begin to **listen** reflectively - force it at first
2. Continue listening until get a YES
3. Summarize other's view - getting a YES
4. State your view (**assert**) - clarify similarities & differences in your turn if possible
5. Other will react - listen again until another YES
6. Recycle until emotions reduced in intensity
7. Summarize other's view, clarifying similarities & differences
8. Invite other to summarize your view - listen again if energy rises.
9. Summarize both sides and get a YES
10. Formulate the issue – move to **problem-solving**




This slide outlines what rawing together all the skills in the process can look like. Remember, that sometimes you spend a lot of time in the first 5 steps.

One other observation, with some conflicts, this process of listening, assertion and summarizing is all that is needed. When people feel understood, the dynamic changes and it feels not like a conflict but like a discussion.

Sometimes what you discover is that you have a value or belief difference. Those can not be problem-solved. However, they do help clarify the things that matter to each of you. And then the question becomes, given we see this situation differently , how can we work together while acknowledging our different values and beliefs?




## The S-TLC System



**STOP**

**Take time out**


- Slow it down
- Reactive -> proactive
- Ways to do this?



**THINK**

**Think before you act!**


- Sources
- Goals/outcomes



**LISTEN**

**Listen before you say anything!**


- Attend
- Follow
- Reflect
- **Go for the yes!**



**COMMUNICATE**

**Speak for yourself**

- Assert



And to wrap up. Remember S-TLC!

## Tips

- Being clear about the outcome you want
- Watch assumptions – reality check
- Focus on situation/behavior not person
- Asking questions (open ended, non-leading!)
- Tone and words - neutral
- Avoid absolutes (never, always)
- Avoid “You”! Speak from yourself
- Avoid “Should”!
- Assertiveness vs aggressiveness

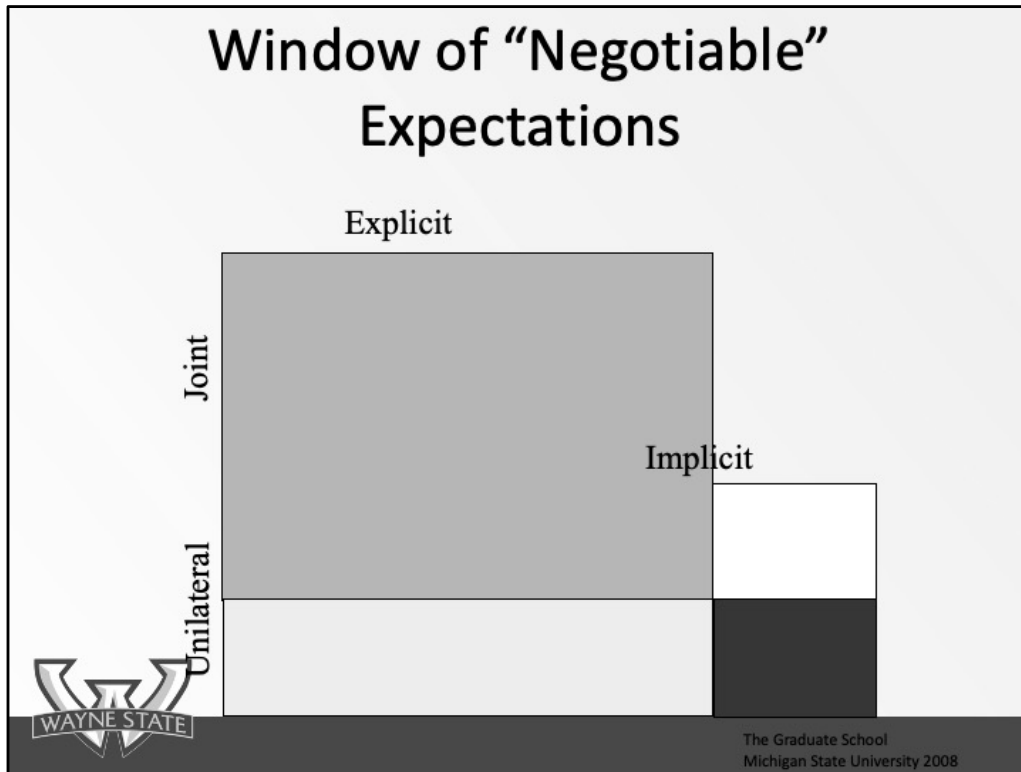


These are some tips I remind myself of when I am addressing conflicts with others or helping others address conflict with each other.

## Preventive work: Setting expectations

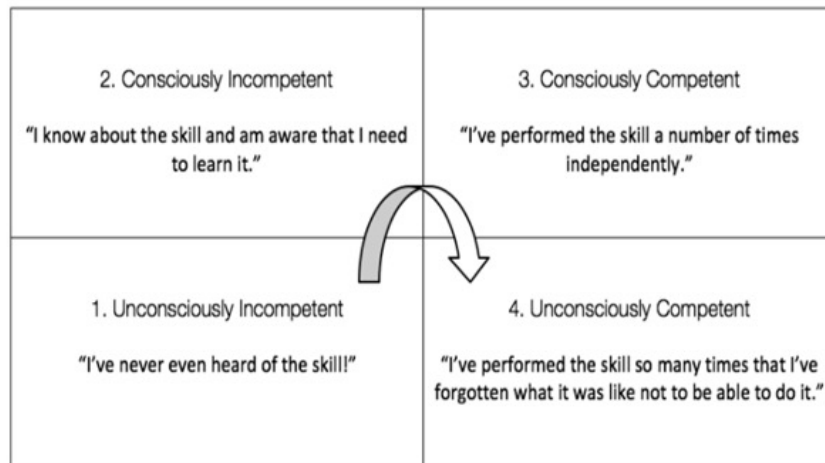


I am all for a good conflict. What I find problematic is when I have a conflict with someone that did not need to occur because we had not been clear initially with each other what our expectations were for our relationship, for our work etc. Thus, a way to prevent “unnecessary” conflict, is to invest the time setting expectations about what your relationship will be like, how we will handle issues as they arise.



This is a lovely graphic to capture the value of JOINTLY and A PRIOR setting expectations. Making them explicit rather than assume we are “all on the same page!”. While having these discussions may feel awkward at first, their value is immeasurable and can actually build stronger more constructive relationships so that when conflicts do occur, we can deal with them confidently because our relationship is strong and well-grounded.

# Step Model of Skill Development



Learning a new skill is a progressive process. I find it helpful to remember how we learn and progress in becoming competent with our skills. Let's focus on active listening as the skill. We first start out not even knowing we need to learn this skill or don't distinguish it from competitive/combatative listening or passive listening. Then we are introduced to active listening and its three sets of skills (attend, follow and reflect). And we start practicing it. It may feel awkward as we do it and you may find yourself saying "This is not me"...hang in. With practice, it can become part of who you are! You will find yourself going, okay, so I need to do this...I need to remember to attend, show I am following, paraphrase, perception check, i.e., you are going through the list. With practice, you see that you are becoming more comfortable with it, although you are still very conscious about what you are doing. I promise with continued practice, it becomes part of who you are...you start doing it automatically. Others will often comment on it...noticing they feel good in your presence, that you seem to care about them and their experiences. I would suspect that as you become a good active listener, that you will find yourself with fewer misunderstandings and conflict. Give it a try, hang in there, and keep working it!

# Discussion

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# Dirty Dozen of Communication

## Sending solutions

- Ordering, directing
- Threatening, warning
- Moralizing, “shoulds”
- Advising, giving solutions

## Judging

- Criticizing, blaming
- Name calling, shaming, ridiculing
- Diagnosing, analyzing
- Praising, agreeing

## Avoiding other’s concerns

- Diverting
- Logical argument, teaching
- Affirming



The next few slides are something I have added in. Some information and tips that I have found useful in my work and in my life regarding preventing unnecessary conflict and facilitating effective communication while in conflict.

Ways of communicating that can disrupt constructive conversation or prevent another from sharing their thoughts and feelings on issues of importance. When you want to truly understand what another is telling you, you need to listen actively and share back what you have heard and verifying if you have been accurate. These communication approaches above disrupt prevent developing an understanding of the other’s perspective and experience.

## Power of a good I-Statement

- Calls attention to our rights **and** responsibilities as communicators
- Provide needed info to the other
- Put self forward as honest and reliable
- Taking responsibility for how we feel and how we act – own up.
  - Recognize that we contribute in some way
  - “you” language – way of avoiding responsibility
    - “you are making me mad!”



When you want to share your needs (assert), it is important to “speak for yourself” and share your perspective. One of the ways we communicate that is by “owning” the statement through using I. For example, I feel angry; I think this is not effective; rather than you are making me angry or you think this is effective.



## Power of a good I-Statement

- Reduces chances of other's defensiveness
  - "you" statements – suggest blame
  - "mis"assume
    - Perception of person = qualities
      - You are so lazy!
    - Others don't change so we can predict their behaviors
      - You always do that or you never do this
- Challenges
  - Hard when I am mad – Stop and take a break
  - Doesn't sound like me – step model of skill acquisition –

