



## Understanding Conflict: When Did the Knife Go In?

Imagine a coworker and you have just delivered a report to senior management about a project on which you collaborated. As you leave the meeting, your coworker shakes his head and mutters “hope you’re happy”. Since then, he has barely acknowledged you. You are mystified by their attitude because the report was so well received by management. You decide to approach him, but don’t really know where to begin.

You can unravel the mystery of conflict by 1) understanding how people view such confrontations and 2) by using conversation skills to get to the root of the conflict.

First, remember that in conflict, each person has their story. People tend to see themselves as either the innocent victim or perhaps the righteous hero. They cast their adversary, of course, as the villain. Attachment to these roles results in conversations that quickly regress to debates or outright confrontations: a verbal thrust and parry in which judgement is met by justification. People expend tremendous energy and create significant drama, but at the end of the day feel like they’ve gone in circles with little understanding or identification of the real issue.

Stories consist of three basic elements: plot, characters, and theme. In conflict, these equate to: 1) what happened; 2) how it impacted the person; and 3) what need of theirs was unmet or threatened. To begin to explore someone’s conflict story, ask yourself “when did the knife go in?” for them. This metaphor represents the point of wounding – when they saw themselves as the victim (and pegged you as the villain). In some cases, the inciting incident will be obvious, but other times you will need to uncover it.

Second, use *open-ended questions* to peel back the layers of their conflict story. Used strategically, open questions help you discover why someone is upset and what they need to move forward. Of course, these questions must be accompanied by curiosity, because a question such as “what on earth were you thinking?” will understandably foster defensiveness. Rather, ask genuine questions to uncover new information and to encourage the other person to talk about what went on for them. As they verbalize their story you can learn not only when “the knife” went in for them, but also the impact events have had on them and what (unmet) need is fueling their frustration.

The following two tips will ensure your questions are helpful and productive. Remember to paraphrase the answers you receive to demonstrate you understand their perspective. This also provides balance to the conversation so your questions do not come across as an interrogation. Also, let the other person know why you are asking your question. Even an open question will spark some defensiveness as the other person wonders “why does he/she want to know?” You will significantly reduce defensiveness when you provide a context for your question by telling the other person why you are asking it and how the information will be useful.

In the example above, you might start by noting the lack of communication or feelings of tension, letting them know you want to try to work things out, and asking simply “what’s up?” In many cases, their reply will let you know not only what happened, but how it affected them (“you grab all the credit for our work and you ask me what the problem is?!”) In other cases, you may need to probe further “what was it about the meeting that upset you?” or “what went on for you during the meeting?” As you begin to peel the layers of their story, listen for their unmet need. When you uncover it, confirm you have it right: “so from your perspective, I received the credit – and you want to ensure that you get fair recognition for your contribution to the project”.

While this is by no means the end of the conversation, this discovery provides a foundation for deeper understanding and, eventually, resolution. From a relationship perspective, you build empathy when you demonstrate you understand both the events in question and the impact of those events on the other person. From a resolution perspective, you have identified one of the key components for a collaborative solution (in this case, recognition and fairness.)

So when confronted by conflict, resist the urge to proclaim your own story. Instead, put your perspective temporarily on the back burner and focus on discovering “when the knife went in”. You may find that what seems to be an insoluble conflict is really “elementary, my dear Watson.”