

## Tips for Transforming Conflict

When conflicts arise, many of us automatically fall into adversarial ways of thinking—you vs. me. Doing so typically means there is a winner and a loser. However, in reality both sides usually lose something because the relationship is damaged and the problem is often not truly resolved.

Most of us are aware that there is a more constructive way to deal with conflict. Typically called a win-win, collaborative or cooperative approach, it can be applied to all kinds of conflict, from small everyday disputes between individuals to large ones that divide communities. At Search for Common Ground, we call this strategy the common ground approach, where the parties involved understand and honor their differences and find a mutually beneficial agreement based on shared interests—their common ground.

So, how do we move from an adversarial approach to a cooperative or “common ground” approach? By shifting our attitude and behavior—and with practice and experience. Here are a few tips that might help:

- 1. Accept that conflicts are a natural part of life:**  
There are seven billion people sharing resources and living together on this planet. Conflict is the natural result of differences in the world. We all have different needs and beliefs and we will always have conflicts.
- 2. Treat conflict as an opportunity:**  
Conflicts are neither positive nor negative in themselves. It is the way we deal with the situation and the other parties that determines the consequences. Conflicts don't have to be destructive. Instead we can view conflict as an opportunity to grow, learn and improve relationships.
- 3. Be aware of your initial reaction and take a deep breath:**  
We all have automatic responses to conflict. We may want to run away, put up our defenses or dig in and fight. Our immediate responses depend on who is involved in the conflict and what it's about. Instead of giving in to our initial impulse, it's important to pause and think about our approach.
- 4. Choose your approach:**  
There are always choices in a conflict. Some conflicts are just not worth dealing with. In other cases, we may feel the best response may be to say “no.” But when the goal is to solve the problem in a positive way, a cooperative approach is the best option. We have a choice—between a win-lose approach, where we focus on each other as the problem, and a win-win approach, where we solve the problem together.
- 5. Listen and learn:**  
Conflicts are often based on stereotypes and lack of information. We need to find out more about each other—ask questions and listen until we truly understand each other's point of view. We all want to be heard and understood. Truly hearing and being heard can actually transform a conflict.
- 6. Discover what's important:**  
We tend to have disagreements over our positions—the way we see things or what we

want. But we seldom talk about our interests and needs—the reasons why our positions are important to us. There is value in expressing our interests and needs honestly, and asking the other parties about theirs. Often there is some overlap in interests and needs—the common ground where we are likely to find solutions.

7. **Respect each other:**

Conflicts can be very emotional. Whatever happens, we must respect everyone's dignity. A lasting agreement can only hold if the parties grow to trust one another. We need to take responsibility for our role in the conflict and stay away from blaming; it only creates resentment and anger.

8. **Find common ground:**

Finding common ground does not mean settling for the lowest common denominator. It's about generating the highest. Often when people disagree, they meet in the middle and everyone has to compromise. Finding common ground is creating a new “highest common denominator.” It means identifying something we can all aspire to and work towards together.

9. **Be creative:**

There are always many different ways to solve a problem and meet a need. If there is trust and commitment, a solution is possible. The goal is to generate alternatives and make sure we address the deep issues, not just the superficial symptoms, so the conflict is less likely to recur.

**A final point...**

We each make a difference. Working together to find common ground is a learning experience for all involved. It takes courage to take this route because it is rarely the easy option, but ultimately it can be the most rewarding. By choosing to deal with conflict in a non-adversarial manner, we create a place where it is safe to disagree and contribute to transforming the way the world deals with conflict.