

Ombuds Office Columbia University

Informal Conflict Resolution Strategies

I. DIRECT COMMUNICATION

If the discussions seem to be “stuck” in the format you are using, try changing to another format. For example, if the other party isn’t answering your phone messages, try email or a face-to-face conversation. If oral conversations are going around in circles, try including a third-party facilitator or writing a letter.

II. EXPLAINING THE IMPACT ON YOURSELF

One way to increase the civility of difficult interactions is to use “I statements” rather than “you statements” that is explaining how you feel and what you want rather than interpreting or judging what the other party did or second-guessing the other party’s motives.

A variation on this approach is the formula

When you.... I feel.... Is this what you intended?

That is, you state as factually as possible what the other party has said or done (or not done), and then move to your reaction, indicating that there is a consequence to her/his behavior, a relationship between the two of you. You close your statement with an invitation for the other party to respond, opening up the question of what kind of interaction the other party wishes to have. For example, if your reaction is to become resentful or withdrawn, the other party might acknowledge that his/her intention was indeed to create more distance between you. On the other hand, s/he might recognize an unintended consequence of what s/he did, and begin a discussion of how to change the style of communication and improve your relationship in the future.

III. WRITING A LETTER

Putting your thoughts in written form can be very helpful in clarifying your own thoughts and in having maximum control over how they are communicated to the other party—who can read the letter and reflect on its contents in privacy and without the pressure of formulating an immediate response.

A letter should have 3 parts:

1. The **facts** as you perceive them – with no interpretations or opinions. What an audiotape or videotape would record.
2. Your **feelings** or reactions. The impact. The difficulties or hurt that now exist.
2. The **remedies** you propose. What you think should happen next. Your ideas for constructive next steps, or future “ground rules.”

Sometimes it is helpful to write a letter even if you don’t give it to the other party. It may help you get your feelings outside yourself and identify your priorities, and it may also serve as a “script” of what you want to emphasize when you talk directly with the other party