ARTICLE
CONFLICT

Choose the Right Words in an Argument

by Amy Gallo
When addressing a conflict with a colleague, the words matter. Sometimes, regardless of how good your intentions are, what you say can further upset your coworker and just make the issue worse. Other times you might say the exact thing that helps the person go from boiling mad to cool as a cucumber.

So, when things start to heat up with a colleague — you don’t see eye-to-eye on a project or you aren’t happy with the way you were treated in a meeting, for example — how can you choose your words carefully? To help answer this question, I talked with Linda Hill, the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and faculty chair of the Leadership Initiative. She is also the co-author of Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation and Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader.

Hill explained that the words we use in confrontations can get us into trouble for three reasons:
First, the stakes are usually high when emotions are. “With conflict, there are typically negative emotions involved, and most of us aren’t comfortable with those kinds of feelings,” she says. Our discomfort can make us fumble over our words or say things we don’t mean.

The second reason that we often say the wrong thing is because our first instincts are usually off. In fact, it’s often the words we lead with that get us into so much trouble. “That’s because too often we end up framing the issue as who’s right or who’s wrong,” she says. Instead of trying to understand what’s really happening in a disagreement, we advocate for our position. Hill admits that it’s normal to be defensive and even to blame the other person, but saying “You’re wrong” or “Let me tell you how I’m right” will make matters worse. “We’re often building a case for why we’re right. Let that go and focus on trying to resolve the conflict,” she says.

Third, there’s often misalignment between what we mean when we say something and what the other person hears. “It doesn’t matter if your intent is honorable if your impact is not,” Hill says. Most people are very aware of what they meant to say but are less tuned into what the other person heard or how they interpreted it.

So how do you avoid these traps? Hill says it’s not always easy but by following a few rules of thumb, you’ll have a better chance of resolving the conflict instead of inciting it:

**Say nothing.** “If the emotional level is high, your first task is to take some of the emotion out,” she says. “Often that means sitting back and letting someone vent.”

The trouble is, Hill says, that we often stop people before they’ve gotten enough of the emotion out. “Hold back and let them say their piece. You don’t have to agree with it, but listen,” she says. While you’re doing this, you might be completely quiet or you might indicate you’re listening by using phrases like, “I get that” or “I understand.” Avoid saying anything that assigns feeling or blame, like “Calm down” or “What you need to understand is.” If you can do this effectively, without judging, you’ll soon be able to have a productive conversation.

**Ask questions.** Hill says that it’s better to ask questions than make statements. Instead of thinking about what you want to say, consider what you want to learn. This will help you get to the root cause of the conflict and set you up to resolve it. You can ask questions like, “Why did that upset you?” or “How are you seeing this situation?” Use phrases that make you appear more receptive to a genuine dialogue. Once you’ve heard the other person’s perspective, Hill suggests you paraphrase and ask, “I think you said X, did I get that right?”

**Own your part.** Don’t act like there is only one view of the problem at hand. “You need to own your perception. Start sentences with ‘I’ not ‘you,’” Hill says. This will help the other person see your perspective and understand that you’re not trying to blame them for the problem. Instead of saying “You must be uncomfortable”, try “I’m feeling pretty uncomfortable.” Don’t attribute emotions to other people. That just makes them mad.
So, how do you choose the right words to use in a conflict? Of course, every situation is different and what you say will depend on the content of what you’re discussing, your relationship with the other person, and the culture of your organization, but these suggestions may help you get started:

**Scenario #1: You have a criticism or dissent to offer. Perhaps you disagree with the popular perspective or perhaps you’re talking to someone more powerful than you.**

Hill suggests you get to the underlying reason for the initiative, policy, or approach that you’re disagreeing with. Figure out why the person thinks this is a reasonable proposal. You can say something like, “Sam, I want to understand what we’re trying to accomplish with this initiative. Can you go back and explain the reasoning behind it?” or “What are we trying to get done here?” Get Sam to talk more about what he’s up to and why. Then you can present a few options for how to accomplish the same goal using a different approach: “If I understand you correctly, you’re trying to accomplish x, y, and z. I’m wondering if there’s a different way to approach this. Perhaps we can…”

In a situation like this, you also want to consider the venue. “You may be able to have a more candid discussion with someone if it’s one-on-one meeting rather than in front of a group,” she says.

**Scenario #2: You have bad news to deliver to your boss or another coworker. You missed a deadline, made a mistake, or otherwise screwed up.**

Hills says the best approach here is to get to the point: “I have some news to share that I’m not proud of. I should’ve told you sooner, but here’s where we are.” Then describe the situation. If you have a few solutions, offer them up: “These are my ideas about how we might address this. What are your thoughts?” It’s important to own up that you made a mistake and not try to point out all the reasons you did what you did.

**Scenario #3: You approach a coworker about something he or she messed up.**

Here you don’t want to launch in right away, Hill says, but ask permission to speak to the person about what happened: “Mary, can I have a moment to talk to you about something?” Then describe what happened. You can say: “I’m a little confused about what occurred and why it occurred. I want to discuss it with you to see how we can move this forward.” Use phrases like “I understand that X happened...” so that if Mary sees the situation differently, she can disagree with your perspective. But don’t harp too long on what happened. Focus on figuring out a solution by engaging her with something like: “What can we do about this?”

**Scenario #4: You approach a colleague about feeling mistreated or you’re upset about something he or she said.**

Hill points out that this is a good place to talk about the difference in intent versus impact. After all, you don’t know what your coworker’s intent was; you only know that you’re upset. You can start off
with something like: “Carl, It’s a little bit awkward for me to approach you about this, but I heard that you said X. I don’t know whether it’s true or not. Regardless, I thought I should come to you because I’m pretty upset and I thought we should talk about it.” The focus shouldn’t be on blaming the person but airing your feelings and trying to get to a resolution: “I want to understand what happened so that we can have a conversation about it.”

If Carl gets defensive, you can point out that you aren’t questioning his intent. “I’m not talking about what you intended. I thought it was better to clear the air, rather than stewing about it. Would you agree?”

**Scenario #5: A colleague yells at you because of something you said or did.**

This is where you might stay quiet at first and let them vent. People usually run out of steam pretty quickly if you don’t reciprocate. Keep in mind though, Hill says, that you never deserve to be yelled at. You might say: “I realize that I’ve done something to upset you. I don’t respond well to being yelled at. Can we sit down when I can be better prepared to have a conversation about this?”

**Scenario #6: You’re managing someone who engages in conflict regularly and is annoying or upsetting the other people on your team.**

Sometimes you have a hothead on your team — someone who seems to even enjoy conflict. Of course disagreements aren’t always a bad thing, but you need to help the person explore how he might be damaging his reputation and relationships. You can try something like: “I like having you around because from where I sit, you raise important issues and feel strongly about them. I also know you’re well-intentioned. I’d like to talk you about whether you’re having the impact you want to have.” Get him to think through the consequences of his regular battles.

Of course, even if you follow this advice, sometimes there just aren’t the right words and it’s not possible to have a constructive discussion. “Occasionally, you need to let it go and come back to it another time when you can both have the conversation,” says Hill. *It’s OK to walk away* and return to the discussion later, when you’re ready to make a smart and thoughtful choice about the words you want to use.

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