

Diffuse a conflict by asking questions

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How many of you have sat in a meeting where things got hot under the collar between two or more people? What did you do? Take sides with someone? Take sides with no one? Stay quiet?

Quite often I sat in meetings and watched two people go for each other’s throats. And it would typically involve two people who were routinely at odds with each other. I’d end up shaking my head in disappointment and usually lost respect for the two so-called leaders who resorted to petty name calling and insults in an attempt to make themselves look better than the other person.

Early on during my leadership career, I’d remain quiet during these types of occasions but that was ineffective because some conflicts literally ended with me and others breaking up attempted fist fights. (Yes. Fist fights!) At some point in my career I thought it would be a better idea to take the side of the person I agreed with more but that often ended up with me at the bottom of a pile when conflict erupted.

Finally, later in my career, I tried a new approach: asking questions to diffuse a conflict. I’d pay attention to what each side was arguing about and

I’d formulate and ask constructive questions that would divert their attention from each other to me, causing them to answer my questions in some degree of detail. I wasn’t breaking up the fight, rather, I was steering them to provide further explanations of their viewpoints without the outward anger and ruffled emotions.

Whenever one of the protagonists tried to interrupt, I’d politely ask them to hold off until their rival finished answering my question. I’d then continue to ask a few more questions to each side, assembling a clearer and detailed picture of each viewpoint.

Many times this led to a better understanding of both sides, as well as sometimes ending the conflict and leading to an agreement. Even if neither side changed their stance, at least they were much calmer and more knowledgeable of the overall situation at hand.

When using this technique, be sure to not ask questions about anyone’s feelings or emotions. Instead, be sure to focus on an aspect that needs explaining. They will have to break eye contact with their opponent to think about answering you.

Don’t ask questions, though, if either protagonist has reached the point where they look like the blood has drained

from their face--a pale, white face means they are about to hit someone. You’d think people can control their emotions enough to avoid getting in physical fights but not everyone can. During those shameful moments, it’s best to simply end the meeting and separate the protagonists until which time they can exercise better judgment. (A red face, on the other hand, is okay as they are merely blowing off their anger with just words. And that’s the time for you to swoop in with questions.)

Also avoid asking questions if you are involved in the argument in any way personally. First, you may not be thinking clearly enough to ask a question of substance, and second, your question will probably be biased or rhetorical in some way and may make the matter much worse.

Most people in most situations are respectful, professional, and emotionally intelligent enough to calmly discuss topics with open minds and mutual respect of one another. But when things occasionally get out of hand with heated arguments, the questioning technique can certainly ring them back in. People should be polite enough to at least attempt to answer a question. Give it a try!

~ The End ~