



NEUTRALIZATION

THE ART OF PREVENTING CONFLICT BEFORE IT GETS STARTED©

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Neutralization

No One Likes Conflict

Most employees, regardless of where they sit on an org chart, allow conflict (or, more accurately, the perception of conflict) to impede their chances of successfully solving an issue that involves other people. They think that if they have a problem with someone (or something) any attempt at addressing the issue will be confrontational and will result in conflict.

This misconception is aggravated further by the commonly held belief that in order to solve a situation they need to change the other person involved. Somewhere along the way the belief is developed that, to arrive at a resolution, “we need to change ‘who’ they are and they need to change how they are affecting us”.

The major flaw with thinking like this is that very few people can actually be forced to change if they don’t want to. So what ultimately happens when a person is challenged is that they will go to great lengths to avoid making an unwanted and uncomfortable change. They will begin to get defensive and do everything they can to deflect responsibility away from them and to not take ownership for their actions. Anyone who has been in a situation such as this can attest to the fact that this only increases the conflict while decreasing the likelihood of successfully resolving the original issue.

This is why so few approaches to resolving interpersonal conflict actually and consistently work. Regardless of what they tell you to do, the survival instincts of those involved kick in as each person actively seeks rationale, justification, and evidence to prove they are right, the other person is wrong, and their reaction to the situation was indeed the correct one.

The Power of Neutralization

Neutralization allows you to defuse a situation and regain control of your life without engaging in conflict and without fighting with the other person. With neutralization (vs. resolution) there is no perceived “winner” or “loser” because there is no challenge against which others must defend themselves.

Have you ever been in the uncomfortable position of trying to deal with a difficult person by using all of those great conflict resolution and communication techniques you have learned over the years...only to discover the difficult person is actually a “2%er” who refuses to play along? As you attempt to engage the 2%er in a positive, constructive conversation about what they are doing wrong they respond in a way that wasn’t covered in the role-playing exercises you participated in during your training...rather than reply in an equally positive and constructive way they laugh at you and answer with the one-finger salute.

Where do you go from here?



Neutralization, on the other hand, is effective because it only requires the participation of a single person...you. By neutralizing the 2%er, you stop them in their tracks in a way that prevents them from doing further damage to others. When the 98% understands how to neutralize the 2%, they have the power to prevent the 2% from continuing to exhibit the behaviour that is adversely affecting others.

The Art of Neutralization...How It Works

First there must be true and honest self-examination to understand why there is a conflict in the first place. The result is identifying who the problem really lies with and, therefore, what the root source actually is. For example, Susan is always early for appointments and meetings at work. This isn't merely a matter of professional courtesy but rather a core value of Susan's. Unfortunately for Susan, many of her co-workers are not as sensitive to time and are often two or three minutes late. This drives Susan crazy because she interprets their lateness as a serious show of disrespect.

Now, according to conventional practices, the solution would be to expect those who are always late to change their behaviour...or else. Or, even worse, the answer would be a compromise whereby everyone needs to change who they are. But we all know how easy it is to change someone else. Expecting others to change to accommodate you is as useful to the situation as thinking that yelling at them will lead to a change. So how could this situation be neutralized?

First, Susan could identify through self-examination that she is the one with the issue, not her co-workers. Sure, the tardiness of her co-workers acts as the trigger for her frustration and ill temper. However, this isn't Susan's true problem. Susan needs to realize that the source of her problem is her own reaction to the minor tardiness of her co-workers, not the actual tardiness itself.

This means that Susan can neutralize her own behaviour such that she no longer allows it to adversely affect her. To do this, Susan needs to understand exactly why it bothers her so much when her co-workers arrive late. This will lead Susan to the proper course of action to take.

If the work environment is relaxed and showing up to meetings a couple of minutes late is a completely acceptable behaviour, perhaps Susan needs to schedule her meetings 5 minutes later in her own calendar. This would result in her arriving to meetings at roughly the same time as everyone else.

If the work environment isn't relaxed and the tardiness of her co-workers has more to do with simply losing track of time and showing up late, Susan might choose to speak with her manager about the issue.

Either way, as far as Susan's own behaviour is concerned, the situation is neutralized.

Alternatively, if Susan doesn't attempt to neutralize her own behaviour and the tardiness of her co-workers continues to create conflict in the office, Susan's manager can take action to neutralize the situation. The manager could follow up with those who are late and learn from them why they are unable or unwilling to arrive on time. If the meeting time is early in the morning and some of Susan's co-workers are unable to arrive to work as early as she can, perhaps the answer is for the manager to schedule the meeting later. If Susan's co-workers don't offer a legitimate and reasonable explanation as to why they are consistently late, the manager may need to take action to hold the co-workers accountable for their timeliness.



If the manager feels Susan is over reacting to her co-workers in light of the company's culture, he may need to speak with her about the culture of the workplace and what she can do to "fit" in better. Either way, numerous actions are available to the manager to ensure Susan's behaviour doesn't harm her co-workers and that the tardiness of her co-workers doesn't adversely affect Susan.

This is neutralization...the potential conflict is stopped before it gets started.

This concept of neutralization is, at its core, making a conscious effort to be as proactive in our lives as we can. By always looking for ways we can minimize triggering what causes us to become angry and lose our temper, we effectively neutralize our own behaviour. This is what we call "being in control without being controlling". In other words, we are able to exercise greater control over our own behaviour, actions, and lives without feeling as if we need to control the behaviour, actions, and lives of others.

A second example of this would be if Susan hates driving in rush hour traffic and finds herself constantly arriving home or at clients angry. Susan could neutralize this undesirable behaviour by (a) scheduling meetings to coincide with off-peak traffic periods; (b) using public transit so Susan isn't driving; (c) increasingly using technology to teleconference with clients and possibly even telecommute to work; or (d) finding a job that doesn't require her to travel during rush hour periods. While some of these solutions are easier to implement than others, they are all within the realm of what Susan can control.

What About The Other "Guy"?

It isn't always our own behaviour that we need to neutralize. Often, it is the behaviour of others that causes the greatest difficulty for us. If we know we can't easily (or ever) change others, how can we neutralize their behaviour that is causing us so much harm?

This isn't as hard as you might think once you are able to emotionally detach yourself from the other person's behaviour. When we are able to set our "me" behind us, such that it doesn't influence our feelings, thoughts, or behaviours, we no longer feel the need to blame or condemn the other person for their behaviour. When we become emotionally detached, we no longer feel the solution to our problem requires that we change the other person, their beliefs and perspectives, or even their attitude. We realize we don't need to change who they are...we simply need to neutralize their immediate behaviour.

Suppose one of Bill's co-workers holds very strong political beliefs that are completely opposite to what Bill believes. For Bill to get into a workplace argument with his co-worker over who is right and who is wrong will accomplish nothing and simply lead to an unnecessary and unwinnable conflict.

Instead, Bill needs to first acknowledge that his co-worker holds a perspective driven by a belief that is both very real and completely valid to the co-worker. For Bill, the key is not to try to change his co-worker's point-of-view or belief. Instead, Bill's goal is to stop any inflammatory or offensive comments being made to him by his co-worker while in the workplace. This can be accomplished by Bill speaking directly, openly, and honestly, telling the other person what he needs or how he feels, not that his co-worker is wrong or what he is doing wrong.

For example:



“Steve, I know that you believe that your political perspective is the right one and you have a right to that belief, but when you make comments that belittle or speak down to any alternative or opposing view points, it really disturbs many of us who do not share your perspective. I would appreciate it if you do not say anything that is perceived as demeaning or intolerant to the beliefs of others when we work together. Thank you.”

One of two things will happen. Either the co-worker is part of the 98% and will comply with Bill’s request or this person will be part of the 2% and will begin an argument trying to defend their actions and position. In the latter case the solution is simple, Bill refuses to further engage in the discussion and walks away. Bill can then also choose to restrict or eliminate future interactions with this co-worker that are not directly related to the completion of his work. Lastly, if Bill’s co-worker continues to try to pull Bill into disruptive politics-based conversations when they are supposed to be working, Bill can inform his co-worker that he will approach their manager regarding the co-worker’s disruptive behaviour if the behaviour doesn’t stop.

By doing this, Bill neutralizes his co-worker’s behaviour by giving him nowhere to go with it. This means Bill has accomplished his goal of neutralizing the problem before it turns into conflict. Either: (1) the undesirable behaviour stops; or (2) Bill adjusts his own behaviour such that the person trying to engage Bill in the conflict is no longer able to.

Another example could be that you back out of a parking space and accidentally bump into another person’s car. The other person jumps out of their car and begins to yell and scream. Neutralization takes place by remaining calm and stating the facts with an apology.

“Hey...I am really sorry, I honestly didn’t see you. I know you are upset but yelling at me and swearing won’t help the situation. Let’s just exchange information and then let our insurance companies deal with the damage. Again, I am so sorry for not seeing you there.”

This is the art of neutralization...where we neutralize the inappropriate, offensive, or irate behaviour of others by carefully maintaining control over our own behaviour. If you make a mistake and immediately apologize for that mistake, the 98% will always accept a genuine, heartfelt apology. The 2% won’t and will continue to yell and scream. This becomes a moment of truth because you can either allow yourself to be baited into engaging in a conflict with the other person or you can choose not to get emotionally involved. However, the minute you lose it and say something as a counter-attack on the other person, you will become a part of the problem and exacerbate the situation. By remaining calm and looking for a way to neutralize the person verbally attacking you, you will always come out on top.

Too many times we allow our megos, and therefore our emotions, to take over our logical, rational brains. This inevitably limits our ability to neutralize. We then fall into the traps of winning, revenge, blaming, or deflecting responsibility. By taking ownership over our own actions and holding others accountable for their actions we can get closer to neutralizing any and all situations.



Ten Steps to Neutralization:

Follow this 10-step approach to neutralizing any situation:

1. ***Calm down and organize your thoughts*** – When we let our emotions overtake us we lose perspective and are not able to make logical choices aimed at neutralization.
2. ***Offer to try to understand their point of view*** – When we validate their right to feel the way they are feeling (even if we don't agree or understand) we will find it easier to neutralize the behaviour of others.
3. ***Prepare to listen without judgement*** – When we listen without judgement we are allowing that person to vent, which gets them to calm down and effectively neutralizes the energy being put into the other person's behaviour.
4. ***Empathize*** – When we empathize we are putting ourselves in the other person's shoes where, once we see the issue from their point-of-view, we are better equipped to neutralize without attacking.
5. ***Realize your part in the interaction*** – When we can acknowledge and accept our part in the interaction we neutralize the foundation of the other person's attack such that there is no place for them to go.
6. ***Accept responsibility for your part*** – When we take responsibility for our actions, we fully neutralized the other person's argument.
7. ***Tell the truth*** – When we tell the truth without trying to preserve our ego by putting ourselves in a better light or by deflecting, we are able to neutralize and halt the other person's attack in their tracks.
8. ***Investigate possible solutions*** – When we investigate possible solutions without judgement and with neutrality we find solutions that work for all parties involved without being preoccupied with who "wins".
9. ***Value their right to hold their perception*** – When we value their right to hold whatever perception they have no matter how twisted it may seem to us, we no longer feel the need to fight to prove them wrong. Acceptance is not agreement.
10. ***End with a clear understanding of all parties positions*** – When we find a clear understanding of all parties' positions we are better equipped to come to a solution that neutralizes the cause of the issue and helps to prevent future issues from developing for this same cause.



For more information about The 2% Factor and its services:

Go to www.the2percentfactor.com to learn about our innovative, highly effective products and services to help you and your employees neutralize any difficult person or situation, such as:

Seminars & Workshops

The 2% Factor **offers a variety of half and full-day seminars onsite** in your workplace to help you, your management team, and your employees:

- Become aware of how their tones, attitudes, and behaviours affect others in the workplace.
- Neutralize the behaviour of others who are adversely affecting you.
- Reduce the stress, frustration, and tension that can result from interactions with managers, co-workers, and staff members.
- Gain an understanding of why others behave the way they do.
- Dramatically increase the level of trust and respect in the workplace.

Cooperative Action Interventions:

The Cooperative Action Intervention is a highly effective workplace conflict neutralization strategy where:

- Emphasis is placed on the perspectives and needs of the employees directly involved making the need for a time-consuming and costly investigation obsolete
- Blame is irrelevant, resolution is central
- Involved employees propose their own solution based on 3 critical questions, increasing the buy-in, compliance, and sustainability of the resulting change
- A Letter of Understanding is created and agreed to by everyone directly involved providing management and HR with a tool that can be used for progressive discipline in the future.

The entire process usually takes only a day or two, minimizes lost productivity by involving only those employees directly involved in the conflict, prevents similar conflict from reoccurring in the future, and often results in both employees being retained as productive contributors for years to come - even when working together!

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