

# **The Problem Is Not the Problem**

## ***Communication About the Problem Is the Problem***

**By Dianna Booher**

The problem is often not the problem. The problem is someone's attitude and communication style *regarding* the problem. Many negative situations we find ourselves in have less to do with power and position than with our communication skills. When you find yourself in such a conflict, try to discard any peripheral put-offs or posturing.

### **Offer the Other Person Face-Saving Comments**

If you expect the other person to take your side and come to agreement, make it easy on his or her pride. "Your mistake is understandable. The map *is* confusing. Several people have gotten lost." Or, "The details *are* complex. Most people don't realize how overwhelming so much information can be. You've made excellent progress so far."

### **Let the Other Person Exercise Options**

People want to maintain a sense of power. That power may come from a strong self-esteem, from the freedom of choice about how and when a job gets done, from control over the success or failure of a project, or from freedom to interact or not interact with others.

Be cautious of taking away a person's choices. They may figure a way to sabotage your project or end the relationship altogether. Provide others opportunities to choose and control.

### **Shun Sarcasm**

Sarcasm humiliates people. "Thanks a lot. That was a big help to have these figures two days after the report was turned in." Or, "Thanks for ordering lunch for me while I was in the meeting. My husband makes all the decisions at home; why shouldn't you take over the responsibility here?"

These are nasty no-no's that only drive wedges between people and intensify already-volatile situations.

### **Leave Exaggerations for TV Sitcoms**

When you exaggerate, the other person often ignores the bigger issue and proves your exaggeration incorrect. You'll wind up arguing about the misstatement rather than the issue.

"These exorbitant overnight-express shipping charges are putting us in the poorhouse." Their likely response: "I don't think \$68 a month for shipping is putting us in the

poorhouse.” Or “You always find fault with my suggestions.” They may reply, “I don’t always find fault. I liked your suggestions in last week’s meeting. I even went out of my way to tell you so.”

Statements like these move you off the subject and onto defending the exaggeration.

## **Don’t Act Incredulous**

The incredulous person greets the other with a quizzical look of disbelief and shock at the “stupidity” of what has happened. “So you left the issue unresolved hoping someone else would handle it?” “Why in the world would you believe that?” “What makes you think that would work?”

Most people can tolerate disagreement when they have to, but they snap when it comes to humiliation. The amused grin, mocking raised eyebrows, or outright laughter can cut a person to the quick even if it seems deserved.

## **Don’t “Dismiss” People**

This “mood” pervades the atmosphere of conflict when one person makes it clear that talk will no longer help, that the details no longer matter and won’t change things, or that what you’re asking is out of the question and should not even be entertained with a discussion. Such a dismissal can be conveyed through words, gestures, or body language. We all know it when we see it.

Next time you’re involved in a problem that won’t seem to resolve itself, ask yourself if the problem is the problem or if the communication *regarding* the problem is the problem.

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577 words

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*For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.*