

Getting Your Way WITH WORDS

Raleigh Employee Assistance Program, Inc. 2004

A certain amount of conflict and friction is inevitable in human interaction whether at home or on the job. How these differences are handled by each party can make all the difference. Quite often, good ideas and workable solutions to problems can come out of conflict, but they also can lead to open warfare and serious breaches of decency. Most leading authorities agree that what we say and how we say it can determine the success or failure in working out discord.

Carol Rubin, a Boston clinical psychologist and co-author of *Fighting Fair*, says people should negotiate and determine what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in conflict. In other words, agree on how to disagree. No one set of guidelines can work for every situation, but these key points generally apply:

- * Respect the other person's right to have an opinion different from yours and be willing to accept some things that may be less than pleasant to hear.
- * Avoid emotional outbursts that vent your feelings but leave the other person feeling under siege.
- * Focus on behavior and substance, not character. Instead of saying, "You're a useless waste of time!" say, "I don't agree with what you are doing. It really upsets me."
- * Consider the context of the argument and be careful not to vent your disappointment in the wrong setting.
- * Understand the value of timing. Discussing differences when one of the parties is an emotional wreck may only heighten the conflict with real exchange of views. It's best to wait until everyone is relatively placid.
- * Be tactful.
- * Let the other person have their say and keep an open mind.

Surprisingly, the key to getting your way in the long run may depend on how tactfully you can turn the other party's strengths to your advantage -- not on how loudly you talk or your level of animation. Call it the art of gentle persuasion:

- * Show empathy -- this indicates that you understand their point of view and are maintaining an open mind.
- * Listen and make it clear to them that you're listening.
- * Ask strategic questions to maintain an exchange of information.
- * Paraphrase the other person's words and summarize previous points.

It all centers around each person understanding the other person's point of view through a genuine effort to communicate rather than insisting on the infallibility of their own views. And if a compromise cannot be reached, it's important to keep the lines of communication open to avoid an all-out conflict. Unvented anger can potentially lead to disaster.