**12 STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMING CONFLICT**[[1]](#footnote-1)

PLANNING

If you’re going to engage someone that you have a problem with, it’s important to be sure you both have the time the conversation requires. Think ahead – perhaps ask the other person to reserve block of their time for you. Expecting your spouse to work out a major disagreement 15 minutes before they have to leave for work is probably not a good plan. Also, choose an appropriate venue for the discussion. Your child’s birthday party is probably not the best place to start a serious discussion of a controversial topic.

BRACKETING

To bracket means to recognize and set aside the initial thoughts and feelings that surface in response to something that somebody says or does. We can’t stop our thoughts and feelings, but we *can* prevent them from getting in the way of our curiosity about the other person’s point of view. For instance, someone might say, “This is the worst place in the world to work”. A bracketed response might be, “For goodness sake, is he overreacting *and* I’m going to listen to him speak his mind.”

PARAPHRASING

If you’ve ever studied active listening skills, you’re familiar with this technique. It’s basically just repeating back in your own words what you’ve just heard the other person say. For instance, someone might say, “I don’t think she should have been elected just because she’s a woman.” You might reply, “You’re saying that gender isn’t a good reason for choosing a particular candidate.” It establishes that you’ve listened carefully. It’s a way of verifying that you’ve understood them correctly. And it’s an invitation for them to listen just as carefully when *you* speak. Once the other person knows they’ve really been heard, then you can share your own point of view.

AGREEING WHEN YOU CAN

Don’t focus solely on what divides you. Whenever possible, affirm the common ground you share with the other person. For instance, “I agree with you that that’s a serious issue.” Or “I share your concerns about that.” And *then* state your position.

FOCUS ON INTERESTS RATHER THAN POSITIONS

Focus on the concern behind a demand. Let’s say your significant other wants to vacation in the mountains and you want to go to the beach. In positional arguing, you’ll keep fighting until one of you gives up and goes someplace you don’t want to go. But if you focus on interests – asking the question, “What are you really interested in?” – then options open up. Maybe your significant other says “I just I want to go somewhere quiet and secluded.” You might say, “What I really want is to go someplace sunny and warm.” Now that you’ve moved from positions to interests, there are hundreds of places where both of your interests can be met (but not necessarily in your original positions).

MULTIPLE OPTIONS

Generate multiple options before making a decision about how to solve a problem. This means not deciding too quickly that there’s only one answer – especially when it’s your own – and rejecting other alternatives. Be open to brainstorming options and trying to find one that could satisfy both parties’ needs or interests.

SPEAK FOR YOURSELF

Speak only for yourself. It’s tempting to try to fortify our position by claiming to represent others, saying things like, “A lot of people are upset that you did that” or “I know that others feel the same way I do.” Don’t do it. It sets an adversarial tone and puts the other person on the defensive. Stick to expressing only your *own* thoughts and feelings.

USE “I” STATEMENTS

“I” statements are a way of owning our feelings and communicating them in a way that doesn’t place blame. For instance, saying “I’m angry” not “You make me mad.” By using “I” statements, you focus on the problem, not the person.

BE SPECIFIC

It’s rarely helpful to make sweeping generalizations like “They never…” or “You always…” Make a point of referencing who, what, when, and where. For instance, “I’m really frustrated that twice this week you neglected to call as you had promised” not “You never keep your promises.” When others use generalizations ask, “Could you give me a specific example so I can understand better what you’re referring to?”

TURN CONCERNS INTO PROPOSALS

Turn concerns into requests or proposals. Don’t dwell on what you’re against – state what you’re for. For instance, instead of saying “We shouldn’t have so much money tied up in inventory” say “I’d like for us to reduce the stock of items we don’t use routinely”. Or, “I’d worry less about your safety if you’d wear your seatbelt” rather than “Don’t get in that car without putting on your seatbelt”.

STATE YOUR INTENTIONS

State your intentions up front, so others understand your motives. “I stopped by because I’m really upset about the committee’s decision. I’d like to talk about my concerns.” The other person will be clear about the purpose of your discussion and you can get to the heart of the matter more directly.

PREFERENCE STATING

Provide honest, clear, straightforward information so there’s no ambiguity. For instance, “I’d like to request…” or “My first choice would be…”. Preference stating leaves little room for misunderstanding your wishes or requests, and the other person doesn’t have to make assumptions or guesses about your preferred outcome.

1. From Lombard Mennonite Peace Center seminar notes [↑](#footnote-ref-1)