

Technology of Conflict Resolution

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My books have always expressed my search for the relationship of equality. This evening I will deal with a rather difficult problem which is at the core of the matter. Because it is very difficult to comprehend things merely in words, I have stopped trying to convince people by talking about something, and have instead been trying to reach them by doing something with them.

One of my latest techniques is that of solving conflicts, which shows our basic approach toward finding answers to problems. Conflicts will always exist where people live together, so much so that it almost seems impossible for the people to imagine that one could live in peace with one's fellowman. Yet I believe I can give the answer to the question of how conflicts can be resolved peacefully. I have no statistics; I have no research. In my work I am empirical. When a mother comes with a problem, I try from my past experience to show her how she can solve it. And if the first way doesn't work, perhaps we can find something else. I speak only with the authority of my own experience, which, fortunately for me, is greatly enhanced by similar experiences of my students.

Until today in our 8000 years of civilization, conflicts were always resolved in a rather simple way. It was a power contest. Whoever had the power and was the stronger one decided the outcome of the conflict, and the weaker one had to submit. Now we suddenly find that this traditional age-old way of solving conflicts no longer functions. In our democratic society no victory has any duration. The black fight against the white, labor against management, women against men, and children against adults. There is victory possible any more through law and order.

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So we have to find new ways of resolving conflicts. I propose not merely a technique, but a technology, which goes much deeper, is a real concern with how can we solve this problem. I give you only a teaser of this by outlining the four points which I have found essential in conflict solving. Each one of these four points sounds absolutely impossible; but I can guarantee to you, that we can actually help any group, or any person in a power conflict to get out of it. We can help parents learn how to get along with their children; labor, with management; teacher, with students; white, with black; male, with female; marital couples, with one another. The evidence we have for our approach is overwhelming: it works. The four points of conflict resolution are the following.

¹Somewhat abbreviated from an informal address after the dinner in honor of the speaker, Fourth Brief Psychotherapy Conference, Chicago Medical School, Chicago, March 24-25, 1972.

DON'T FIGHT—DON'T GIVE IN

The first point is to abandon all hope that anything can be settled in a power contest. If you try to impress upon a child or husband or anyone else, what he should do, he will directly impress upon you that he won't do it. Fighting and giving in are the two resulting pitfalls. The mother fights with the child because he does not do what she wants. But the child is a much better fighter so that the before long gives in. Or, she starts by giving in, the child takes more and more advantage, and the mother ends up getting into a fight.

The technique of not fighting and not giving in can be learned by everybody. It is a cornerstone for a new form of dealing with each other. The first point is not to fight, nor to give in, nor to impress with power and punishment, but through stimulation from

within. You can't win in our society in this power conflict which rages between old polarized goals.

SEE THE GOALS BEHIND THE CONFLICT

The second point is even more difficult. One has to pinpoint the issue of the conflict. The vast majority of all conflicts deal with the consequences but not with the causes of what is wrong.

One must realize that behind all deficiency and maladjustment are definite goals. The goals of the misbehaving child are: he wants either attention (Goal 1), to show his power (Goal 2), to get even (Goal 3), or, because he is discouraged, to give up and be left alone (Goal 4).

Neither parents nor teachers know in most instances, unless they have been trained by us, that it is the child's goal which is decisive, and that one must help the child to change his goal. It is the same in labor or other conflicts. You can't solve a conflict unless you understand the real grievance.

CHANGE YOURSELF AND THEREBY THE OTHER

The third point is the most important—and almost impossible to visualize. You cannot solve a conflict except by mutual agreement. Now you will ask, "If I am in conflict with someone, how can I reach an agreement?" The answer is that in any given relationship there is communication, some kind of agreement anyhow—even when you fight. You cannot possibly fight with somebody unless you first communicate with him that you want to fight, and find his cooperation in fighting with you. If you are unlucky, and he does not want to fight with you, you have no conflict. In *all* relationships there is always communication and cooperation. But people don't always see it.

To explain a conflict situation I use the example of a dialogue. Tragically and superprisingly, I venture to say, we simply know only the lines which our opponent speaks, but not ours. And his lines alone do not make any sense. When the mother comes complaining, it is about what the children are doing; the children complain about the mother; husband and wife complain about each other. Everybody is full of good intentions, provided the other one will change.

We all try to change the other one and have no luck. Stop thinking what the other one should do; the only one we can change is ourselves. When somebody wants to fight with us and we eliminate ourselves from fighting, then we are no longer party to the agreement of “let’s fight it out.” As long as you are concerned about what society should do, what your husband should do, what the teacher should do; as long as you think about him and her and them, there is no possibility of a solution of the conflict, because you’ve overlooked the only one who can do it—yourself. But this requires belief in one’s strengths, a realization of the tremendous power of change which we have. I am counteracting our social and behavioral scientists who would have you believe that man is a victim of outside forces and try to change these forces, try to change society, the economy, anything, while overlooking the only one whom you can change.

And this, my friends, is one of the strongest statements I can make in my whole approach to psychology and human nature. If, as you feel weak and hopeless when you are confronted with somebody who doesn’t behave properly, you stop thinking about what *he should do* and begin to think about what *you should do*, the doors open wide. You suddenly become aware of the power which you never dreamt you had. Then you can use encouragement, logical consequences, persuasion, all these ways for helping him

to change merely by changing yourself. I think this is the most important lesson, namely, that we begin to see what we are doing and could do differently, and stop thinking about what he should do.

USE PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

The fourth point is, we must reach agreement by shared responsibility. There is no longer any power, any law and order, which can compel people to do something. You can't stop them from drinking, from taking drugs, from crime. All the contributions of the social and behavioral scientists won't get us anywhere. They say these are the underprivileged people; they need money, better housing, better jobs, better education. Of course they need that. But we don't provide it, because we don't know how to influence them. If you do know how to influence them, then you find that these underprivileged children and adults are just like you and me. They only have wrong ideas about themselves.

And so we have to come to the stage where we must sit down together and realize that our problems are common problems. In the family every problem of any child or father or mother is the problem of the whole family which can only be resolved by the technique of family council. In such a family council you speak openly whatever you feel, and solve the problems together. We have seen families deeply engrossed in fighting behavior, where the clever mother began immediately to understand what democracy means and started a family council. In one or two weeks all the problems were gone.

There is the need for leadership. We have no national leader; we have no leaders in our homes and our schools; we have no leaders who can inspire, who can win without fighting, who can integrate. Our teachers think that they have the obligation, single-

handedly, to teach and correct so many children, thirty, forty, fifty, whatever it is. That is not true. Every teacher is confronted with only one class, and has to learn to be the leader. Such leadership must be trained in parents, teachers, management, everywhere.

So the fourth point for solving conflicts is leadership which brings people together to listen to each other, to realize the reality of their common problem, and to share responsibility. As I said, I have no statistics, but the many of my students who learn to apply this technique can tell you it works.