

How Do You Deal with Inner Conflict?



By Linda Adams, President of Gordon Training International

Most people dread conflict—they experience it as uncomfortable and stressful, something to fear. As a result, we learn to avoid, suppress or withdraw from conflict or even act as though it doesn't exist. Rarely do we choose to see the existence of conflict as positive and see that it presents an opportunity for us to move forward if only we are willing to face it and deal with it effectively.

Sooner or later, most of us come to grips with the fact that conflict is inevitable, both within ourselves and in our relationships with others—at work, at home, everywhere.

Not only is conflict inevitable, dealing with it effectively is essential if we are to live up to our capabilities. Conflict causes us to examine issues more carefully and challenges us to develop creative responses and solutions. In fact, conflict is the root of change—be it personal, relational or social.

Usually, when we think of being in conflict, it's between people—between us and our boss or co-worker or spouse or child. But even more often, we experience personal, inner conflict within ourselves. Simply put, inner conflict is when you're battling with yourself. These are the frequent daily inner contradictions that we all experience whether or not we are conscious of them. This kind of conflict arises every time you're faced with making a decision and generally involves a struggle between doing what you think you "ought" to do and being your true self. Sometimes we see these conflicts as insignificant. Here's an example a friend shared with me yesterday just after a job interview. He came away excited and energized by his meeting with the President and felt he'd like to work in that company. His quandary was whether to send a note of thanks and mail it right away or wait a day or two so as not to appear "too eager" or "desperate". After vacillating back and forth between those two options, he acted on his authentic response which was to send the note right away and as a result felt relieved and calm, knowing that his values and behavior were in sync.

What Are the Signs That Let You Know You're in Conflict?

Usually, you experience a vague awareness that something is wrong, a feeling of discomfort, stress or agitation. Often, you feel this discomfort in your body—in your stomach or chest. The

problem is that many times, we don't pay attention to this discomfort and in other cases, we consciously suppress it. As we know all too well, ignoring, avoiding, suppressing or denying inner conflict when it occurs does not mean that it goes away. In fact, we use a great deal of energy to suppress it—to not deal with it—energy which then cannot be put to constructive use. Not only that, but failure to face conflict when it arises and deal with it effectively means that we stay stuck and mired in the problem—debilitated —there's no improvement or expansion or true relief or resolution.

And too often, we resolve the inner conflict by making a decision to do what we “ought” to do instead of what we truly want to do. When we consistently ignore or suppress our true values or needs and opt to make a “safe” or “politically correct” decision, we get increasingly disconnected from our authentic selves. As a result, it becomes more difficult to know what our real needs are.

If you do nothing else after reading this, take notice of any vague feelings of discomfort or agitation that you experience today and consciously trace them to their source. Don't discount them, however insignificant they may seem. Pay careful attention to them. Try to zero in on what's causing you to feel uncomfortable. The cause could be a decision you've been putting off or a risk you're trying to talk yourself out of taking or perhaps it's continuing to go along with a situation that's no longer acceptable to you. Whatever the content of these inner conflicts, acknowledge their existence. It's in these moments—which occur often—that you have the opportunity to get in touch with what your core values and needs are.

When we can summon the courage to allow ourselves to acknowledge and experience these inner conflicts and then have the courage to act in alignment with what we truly believe, the more enriched and fulfilling our lives will become—both at work and at home. The manifestations are a sense of clarity, relief, comfort, expansion, vitality—even exhilaration.

In my next column, I'll discuss conflicts between people and offer a win-win approach you can use to resolve them.

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