Separating People and Problems

by Sophia Tutorial

WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how to separate the identity of the person with whom you are in conflict from the actual issue at hand. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. People vs. Problems
   a. Blaming
   b. I-Statements

1. People vs. Problems

When people are in conflict, they are upset with other. These strong feelings often lead them to blame each other for the problem.

Because one of the goals in conflict resolution is to use strategies and techniques that will focus on the actual problem, the resolution process involves separating people from problems, also known as **people vs. problems**.

TERM TO KNOW

People vs. Problems
A conflict resolution perspective that focuses parties' attention on tangible actions and conditions within a conflict rather than perceived innate qualities of the parties.

1a. Blaming

It may not be easy to initially see the difference between the person and problem because conflict situations cause people react.

⤳ EXAMPLE Someone misses a deadline, and another person says, "You are so irresponsible. I can never count on you. You're always disorganized."

These types of strong always/never reactions are **blaming** statements saying that the person is responsible for something negative that happened. Statements like that will also cause a defensive reaction on the part of the recipient because their character or identity is being attacked.

TERM TO KNOW

Blaming

Attributing a negative experience to another's actions or inactions.

1b. I-Statements

Rather than attack a person by making a statement about the person's identity, it's best to use the conflict resolution technique of I-statements in order to focus on the problem.
This technique focuses on the tangible actions and conditions that are upsetting you rather than on the person.

Focusing on actions is a more useful way to approach a conflict because any one of us can change the way we behave. We can change our actions and our behavior without having to change our innate identity; the conflict is about something specific and tangible, not about identity.

⤳ EXAMPLE The statement "You're irresponsible and lazy. I can't count on you" is a blaming statement focusing on a person.

Responding differently by using an I-statement that focuses on the problem might sound something like, "When you turn in the numbers at the last minute, I become very anxious because I need those numbers to finish the final report on time."

Now you're focusing on:

- A specific occurrence (getting the numbers late)
- Your reaction to that action
- The impact of that action

It's also important to refrain from assuming intentions on the part of the other person. Instead, you can listen to that person's side.

⤳ EXAMPLE In the situation with the late report, you might consider:

- *Is there a reason why the numbers were given to you late?*
- *Is there something going on that you don't see?*

Once we start talking about the specific action, it opens us up to listen to and take into perspective the other person's point of view.

🚩 HINT

Another technique that can be used is to ask clarifying questions to get at the root of the problem.

These can be questions like:

- *What happened here?*
- *Can you tell me more about the situation?*

These questions can reframe the issue at hand to be around the problem instead of the person.

In conflict resolution, a very effective strategy is to move away from focusing on people and identities, and towards focusing on the problem, or the tangible behavior that can be changed.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **people and problems** are often conflated in conflict situations because we tend to react, using blaming statements that attack the innate identity of the other person instead of the action that caused the conflict. You now understand that using I-statements to express what is actually at the root of the conflict is an effective conflict resolution technique that allows us to move away from blaming. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.

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