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Problem Solving Conversations Guidelines

When tensions are high and communication is emotionally charged, it can be especially challenging to make progress towards resolving disputes. The following guidelines will help you work effectively towards understanding and agreement.

Behavior Guidelines:

1. Show respect. Remember that you also have common goals, such as the success of your program or project, even when you have very different ideas about the best way to go about achieving it. No one has more right to be heard, or to have his/her ideas taken seriously than anyone else. Keep your focus on the problem, not the personalities of those involved.
2. Listen. You will only make progress by understanding the other person's position thoroughly. If you are not listening when someone else is talking, but rather are using that time to plan what you're going to say next, or to silently counter their ideas, then you are not increasing your understanding.
3. Suspend your judgment. Parties to a disagreement often categorize each other and thereafter have a very hard time seeing each other in any different light. Step back and test your assumptions about the other's motivation or purpose. Stay curious in the conversation to avoid making judgments based on old patterns.
4. Seek to understand. Do what it takes to understand others' positions from their perspective. Use active listening skills to paraphrase the other's idea and then ask if you understood it correctly. Make it clear that you do understand. It doesn't mean you agree.

Communication Guidelines:

1. Use "I" statements, not "you" statements. Pointing out what you think the other has done ("you intimidated me") only makes the other defensive and moves the conversation off track. Explain from your own perspective ("When you yell, I get intimidated and I freeze") so that the focus is on the speaker's experience, which creates understanding.
2. Don't interrupt, yell, or go silent. This is a key element of respect. Interruption and yelling are tactics, not communication. Silence is a kind of refusal to participate, which also ends communication.
3. Share your reasoning; explain your motivation. Rather than stating a position and reiterating it, explain how you arrived at your ideas. Explain what you've based your thoughts on so that your motivation is clear. Use specific facts to describe your reasoning rather than broad generalizations.
4. Articulate your understanding. Don't be afraid to say where you agree with the other, or that you respect the other's thinking. Saying aloud that you see where the other is coming from, or acknowledging that the other has a good point will not weaken your own position, but will help everyone relax and move towards resolution.

"We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

— Albert Einstein