

## The Cooperative Communication Skills **EMERGENCY KIT**

By Dennis Rivers, MA, and Paloma Pavel, PhD

A pocket guide to conflict resolution from [www.NewConversations.net](http://www.NewConversations.net)



Many conflicts get worse than they actually need to be because the participants lose control of themselves and retreat into self-reinforcing patterns of attack and counterattack. Here are ten suggestions, drawn from the literature of conflict resolution and psychotherapy, that can help you navigate your way through everyday collisions of needs and come out still liking yourself and able to work with your "partners-in-conflict." **When a conflict starts, try these suggestions...**

1. **Calm yourself down** by breathing very slowly and deeply. While breathing, think of a moment of great happiness and peace in your life. Doing this will help you from feeling totally swallowed up by the current situation. It is not all of your life. Take a "time out."
2. **Think about what you really need.** What is best in the long run for your mind, your body, your spirit, your workplace, and your ongoing relationship with your partner-in-conflict? Stay focused on the big picture of your own most important goals and needs. Avoid getting distracted by what you may see as someone else's misdeeds.
3. **Imagine your partner-in-conflict as a potential ally.** Imagine that you are marooned on a desert island with your partner-in-conflict, and that the long-term survival of both of you depends on the two of you cooperating in some sort of creative way that will meet more of both your needs.
4. **Begin by listening to the other person and affirming everything you may agree with.** Look carefully for areas where your interests and needs might overlap with the interests and needs of your "partner-in-conflict." If deadlocked on specifics, look for decision rules that both could agree are fair. When deadlocked on rules, look for a mutually trusted mediator.
5. **Summarize the other person's needs, feelings and position, from their perspective,** and do this first, before you present your own needs or requests. When people feel heard, they are more likely to listen. Summarize to let people know that you have understood them, not to argue with their view. Acknowledging another's view does not mean you to agree with it.
6. **Acknowledge and apologize for any mistakes** you may have made in the course of the conflict. Others may do the same if you get the ball rolling by practicing personal fairness. Make an accepting space for your partners-in-conflict to start over. Letting go of defending past mistakes can allow participants in a conflict to see their situation from fresh angles.
7. **Focus on positive goals for the present and the future,** no matter what you and/or your partner-in-conflict may have said or done in the past. Punishing or shaming someone for past actions will not put that person in a frame of mind to meet your needs in the present. The present and future are all you can change.
8. **Make requests for specific actions** that another person could actually do, rather than for overall feelings or attitudes. Explain in positive language how the requested actions will help you, so that the other person feels addressed as a problem-solver rather than criticised as a problem-maker.
9. **When positions collide, focus on principles and potential referees.** For example, if you can't agree on a price for something, see if you can agree on a fair rule to set the price. If you can't agree on a fair rule, focus on finding a referee who could help you and your partner-in-conflict define a fair rule.
10. **Use this conflict** as a motivational stimulus to get yourself started studying more effective and compassionate ways of resolving conflicts. Four good books to start with are: *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton (Penguin Books, 1991); *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way From Confrontation to Cooperation*, by William Ury (Bantam, 1991); and *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution* by Dudley Weeks (Tarcher, 1992); and *The Seven Challenges Workbook* (available free of charge in PDF format at [www.newconversations.net](http://www.newconversations.net)).