

Handout #9 - **MANAGING DISAGREEMENT CONSTRUCTIVELY****Guiding Principles**

Before beginning the discussion of the four-step process of resolving disagreement constructively, it is valuable to review the underlying philosophy of this procedure.

*"It's essence is to honor the legitimate interests of all involved persons."*

**1. PRESERVE DIGNITY AND SELF-RESPECT.**

Preserve and protect the dignity of all *stakeholders* (people who have an important stake in issues under dispute), including your own. When tempers flare, it is easy to say degrading words. Keep your focus on issues, not personalities. Until proven otherwise, assume that the other person is expressing a legitimate concern. Even if the other person appears stubborn or stupid, you won't get any closer to resolving the problem by being insulting.

**2. LISTEN WITH EMPATHY.**

When you are listening to the other person's opinions, put yourself in his/her shoes. Try to see the situation from his/her perspective and understand his/her emotional state. Are you discounting the speaker's message simply because it differs from your beliefs? Are you reacting defensively to an uncaring or hostile attitude on the part of the speaker?

To obtain the information necessary to resolve differences, **you must listen with a neutrality that suspends critical judgment.** When you listen to understand, you convey the message: "I respect you as a person. Your thoughts and feelings are important to me whether or not I agree with them."

**3. DON'T EXPECT TO CHANGE OTHERS' BEHAVIORAL STYLE.**

Trying to change the behavioral traits of another person is almost impossible in the course of resolving a dispute. Instead, focus on *what you say and do* when dealing with a "difficult" person.

**4. EXPRESS YOUR INDEPENDENT PERSPECTIVE.**

When you are the lone dissenter, it is tempting to surrender your views to conform to popular opinion. It is easy to get caught up in a heated argument in which you may win the battle but lose the war. Once you have presented your perspective and shared your concerns, be willing to incorporate alternative ideas or viewpoints that allow required action to be taken.

These guidelines constitute the attitudinal framework necessary for resolving disagreements. With these principles, you communicate, **"I honor you and your needs. I take responsibility for letting you know where I stand. We can manage our differences constructively."**

**THE PROCESS**

The approach requires

1. anticipating disagreement before it boils over into heated conflict;
2. planning an appropriate strategy;
3. preparing to set your strategy in motion; and
4. taking action and checking the results.

Phase I. Diagnosis

What are the advantages to analyzing a potential disagreement?

This allows you time to determine if you want to become personally involved in the situation, instead of simply reacting emotionally and regretting it later.

You have the opportunity to gather information, listen to others, and form your own perspective.

Based on the information you have obtained, you can develop your strategy and determine how much, if any, opposition is likely, and perhaps prevent a full-blown conflict.

At this point, think of a situation in your life where *a view you hold is likely to be opposed* by someone whose agreement or cooperation you need. The setting can be either at work, school, or in your personal life.

Because we will be referencing your situation later on, please write in a description of a disagreement that is developing or has developed that really matters to you. Include the events that led up to the present and its current status. (Use the reverse side of this paper if you need more room.

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## Step 1. Clarify Critical Issues

In order to diagnose a situation, you need to see if your perceptions are shared by other stakeholders. The key is to receive **honest feedback** from the parties involved. However, when these people you count on are part of a boss-subordinate, teacher-student, parent-child relationship, they may not feel safe expressing disagreement. Therefore, *don't expect critical feedback to be volunteered freely.*

To facilitate and encourage stakeholders to share their views honestly, you can do the following:

**Model the desired level of openness**, allowing yourself to be appropriately vulnerable. For example, if suitable to the situation, express your own fears, doubts, and concerns.

**Ask for feedback**—and don't punish those who then tell you something you didn't want to hear.

**Explain why you want feedback**—for example, to build teamwork, realize mutual goals, or create a more satisfying working environment.

**Look for nonverbal clues**, especially from people who may not feel comfortable voicing their opinions. Notice if verbal and nonverbal messages are compatible. For example, is your boss saying, "Take all the time you need," while nervously packing a briefcase and glancing at his/her watch.

If you want to learn where the views of others deviate from yours, you need to *help them disagree with you.*

## Step 2. Identify Stakeholders

Think about the situation you wrote about on page 4. Write the names of those persons who have or had a vested interest in the outcome of the events in your narrative. Include people who have or had to set in motion or live with the decisions you make or made. Indicate each stakeholder's position or relationship to you.

STAKEHOLDER'S NAME

POSITION OR RELATIONSHIP


Note: *While your list of stakeholders may be limited to your "main characters," also consider others who are likely to be most concerned with or affected by the resolution of your disagreement.*

You usually will want to take this step concurrently with Step 1.

## Step 3. Assess Sources of Conflict

Conflicts occur when stakeholders believe that a proposed course of action involves one or more of the following:

1. *Inaccurate or incomplete information.*
  
2. *Inappropriate or incompatible goals.*
  
3. *Ineffective or unacceptable methods.*
  
4. *Antagonistic or other negative feelings.*

Your responses to the following questions will help you probe each category.

**1. Inaccurate or incomplete information.**

- ✓ Do all parties involved have access to the same information? Are some stakeholders receiving information that is withheld from others? For example, has someone exaggerated or suppressed a test score to achieve a desired end, or has the arrival or departure of friends been planned to coincide with the exodus of all parental supervision?
  
- ✓ Is the same information being interpreted differently? Perceptions are influenced by social conditioning, personal history, and vested interests. One person interprets an event as a challenging opportunity, another sees it as a threat.

For your particular situation, do all participants have the same accurate and complete information? If all the stakeholders do not have access to complete information, explain why not. How will you assure that all stakeholders will receive necessary information?

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2. Inappropriate or incompatible goals.

- ✓ When disagreement occurs, hopeless disagreement is not inevitable. Disagreement over goals usually occurs at *one level* of concern. However, a higher level can almost always be found when stakeholders share a common vision. This is a solid starting point where agreement already exists. For example, labor and management may argue over wages, but both parties agree that the primary goal is for the company to remain viable.

Write below the common goals shared by stakeholders, for your situation.

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3. Ineffective or unacceptable methods.

- ✓ Disagreement occurs when individuals feel strongly that their particular method or procedure of performing a task is "better" or more effective than another method to reach a common goal.
- ✓ How stakeholders view the *personal costs* of a method may cause disagreement. For example, a method acceptable to one person may be so time consuming that another person cannot pursue other important goals.
- ✓ Differences over values and ethical concerns.

For your situation, write below the issues, which relate to differences over methods and values.

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4. Antagonistic or other negative feelings.

- ✓ Disagreement, when it surfaces, may have a long history. Left-over resentment from previous conflicts, tends to linger. People who have been humiliated or feel betrayed may act in punishing ways to "even" the score. When disagreement stems from old wounds, it may be difficult to diagnose because it rarely is acknowledged and often masquerades as a "personality clash."
- ✓ Another source of negative feelings may be a sense of frustration or discouragement with one's personal situation or work environment. These feelings can also be the result of intra- or inter-group rivalry and conflict.

As you diagnose your situation, write how long the disagreement you described may have been incubating, and if those involved appear to be rivals.

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Test What You Have Learned

You have practiced the process of diagnosis by applying each step to your own particular problem. The following is a real-life situation that provides another frame of reference. Think about how you would have handled this situation if you were Mary's manager.

**Case #1: Petty Cash**

Mary, a meticulous, hard-working employee, had been with the Ajax Co. for seven years before any problem developed with her performance. Mary had started as a secretary and progressively moved up to head bookkeeper. As such, she was responsible for a large, active petty cash fund. During a spot check, her boss Erwin noticed pencil erasures on expense reports, even though employees had been directed by memo to record their expenses in ink. When Erwin confronted her, Mary confessed to "borrowing" \$700 from petty cash temporarily. She explained that her mother had been in and out of hospitals for two years and had exhausted the family's resources and credit. Mary said that she used the petty cash funds to pay her mother's latest bill at the local hospital. Erwin told Mary that he would consult the company president, Henry, and let her know what was decided. When he consulted Henry, Erwin said he didn't want to sidestep his responsibility and, though he planned on making the final decision, Erwin wanted the benefit of the president's thinking. Speaking as a CPA, Erwin said that his course of action was clear: any employee who steals should be terminated. Henry felt uncomfortable applying Erwin's principle to Mary's case, and wasn't sure what to do.

**Step 1. Clarify Critical Issues**

In your opinion, what is/are the critical issue(s) in this case?

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**Step 2. Identify Stakeholders**

STAKEHOLDER'S NAME

POSITION OR RELATIONSHIP

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**Step 3. Assess Sources of Conflict**

1. How could Erwin and Henry be sure they were receiving accurate and complete information about Mary and her situation?

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2. Whose goals appear to be in conflict in this case? What common ground or expectations is/are shared by these people?

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3. There appear to be some procedural problems involving petty cash. What are these inefficiencies; who is at fault -- the company or Mary; and how can things be changed to ensure this does not happen again? What other avenues could Mary have chosen to help with her situation instead of stealing from the company?

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4. Do you feel Mary has negative feelings towards her employers? Explain your answer and give examples.

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**Phase II: Planning**

After you have diagnosed your situation and identified the central issues, stakeholders, and suggested sources of disagreement, you are ready to plan a strategy for dealing with pertinent differing views.

**Step 1. Recognize Your Patterns**

Most people bring relatively *stable patterns of behavior, or style*, to the resolution of disputes. The common element in your disagreements **is you**. Therefore, start by gathering some information about your typical behavior.

Remember the first quick write you did? Pull it out and think about how you resolved that disagreement. What is your preferred (used most often) strategy of managing disagreement? Briefly describe your approach for dealing with a dispute.

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What is your preferred strategy?

- ❖ Do you take a *selling* approach to convince others that your needs are most important?
- ❖ Do you propose a *decision rule*, such as drawing straws or flipping a coin?
- ❖ Do you settle your differences by domination using *force or threats*?
- ❖ Do you consider a *collaborative strategy* to reach a common goal, so that a win-lose situation can be turned into a win-win victory.

## Test What You Have Learned

## Case #2: Personal Project

As supervisor of a 12-person design section, you notice that one of your designers is drafting plans for an addition to her house. She is an employee whose competence and initiative you value. When you ask why she's working on a personal project during company hours, she says that she has caught up on all high priority work and lacks adequate drafting equipment at home. You also know she has done some non-drafting work on rush projects for the company on her own time at home.

After reading the case, rank the five options—**A.** through **E.** in the spaces provided. Use "1" to indicate the **most** appropriate option, "5" for the **least** appropriate option.

## RANK YOUR OPTIONS BELOW

- A. \_\_\_\_\_ Tell the designer exactly what you think and feel, and invite her also to be frank. Then say you are willing to take the time to work out a mutually agreeable plan.
- B. \_\_\_\_\_ In a friendly way, tell the designer that you understand her thinking. Then convince her not to work on personal projects in the office because it sets a precedent for other employees who may not be willing to do work at home.
- C. \_\_\_\_\_ Ignore the situation. Deal with future problems, if any, when they come up.
- D. \_\_\_\_\_ Offer to let the designer continue to use the equipment for personal projects, but only after hours, during lunchtime, or on weekends.
- E. \_\_\_\_\_ Inform the designer that the company has a policy against doing personal projects during the workday, and following the policy is a condition of employment.

## Step 2. Minimize Pitfalls to Using an Appropriate Strategy

When an individual becomes proficient at anything, he/she tends to overuse that skill. When something works really well, the tendency is to repeat it. When one continues a constant, predictable behavior, others see this pattern as a **personal style**.

In contrast, the term **strategic style** is reserved for those behaviors that one **consciously chooses** to produce desired outcomes.

Page 18 represents an inventory of nine strategic styles for **managing differences**. Depending on the situation, its circumstances, and people involved, a strategy should be chosen which will produce the most advantageous results for all parties.

Depending on the conditions with which you are faced, the degree of personal interaction and flexibility must change. The goal is to become aware of general tendencies so that you can modify well-worn patterns to fit the needs of each situation.

<b>Intensity of Interaction</b>	<b>HIGHLY PERSONAL</b>	<p>Style 3</p> <p><b>DOMINATION</b></p> <p>You unilaterally induce, persuade, force compliance, or resist.</p>	<p>Style 6</p> <p><b>BARGAINING</b></p> <p>You jointly seek means to split differences, set trade-offs, or take turns.</p>	<p>Style 9</p> <p><b>COLLABORATION</b></p> <p>You jointly problem-solve to integrate views.</p>
	<b>MODERATELY PERSONAL</b>	<p>Style 2</p> <p><b>SMOOTHING</b></p> <p>You unilaterally accentuate similarities and downplay differences.</p>	<p>Style 5</p> <p><b>COEXISTENCE</b></p> <p>You jointly establish a basis for both parties to maintain their differences.</p>	<p>Style 8</p> <p><b>SUPPORTIVE RELEASE</b></p> <p>You unilaterally release the issue, stipulate any limits, and provide needed support.</p>
	<b>IMPERSONAL</b>	<p>Style 1</p> <p><b>MAINTENANCE</b></p> <p>You unilaterally avoid confronting differences or delay making changes.</p>	<p>Style 4</p> <p><b>DECISION RULE</b></p> <p>You jointly set objective rules that determine how differences will be handled.</p>	<p>Style 7</p> <p><b>NON-RESISTANCE</b></p> <p>You offer no resistance to the other party's views, blending your efforts with theirs.</p>

Flexibility of Viewpoint

FIRM	MODERATELY FLEXIBLE	FLEXIBLE
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## STYLE 1 - MAINTENANCE

Firm/Impersonal

“You unilaterally avoid confronting differences or delay making changes.”

A unilateral decision to maintain the status quo by avoiding or deferring action on different views. Such non-engagement is usually constructive only as an interim strategy.

*Common Sayings:* “Let well enough alone.”  
“Don’t rock the boat.”

*Applications:* When you make time to collect information, enlist support, augment resources, or deal with higher priority issues; also gains time to build rapport, let emotions cool, or allow recent changes to stabilize.

*Example:* “Joe, the most senior employee in the company, is again generating needless paperwork. However, because he is scheduled to retire in two months, I’ll use maintenance and defer suggesting changes to improve Joe’s system until his successor arrives.”

## STYLE 2 - SMOOTHING

Firm/Moderately Personal

You unilaterally accentuate similarities and downplay differences.

Selling your views by accentuating benefits and glossing over, omitting, or playing down alternative possibilities.

*Common Sayings:*     “Accentuate the positive.”  
                              ”Grease the skids.”  
                              “‘What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

*Applications:*       When you are clear about your viewpoint, but lack authority to require compliance, or don’t have time or energy for a full-scale discussion. Also useful when you want to withhold complete information because you feel it would be hurtful to others, or because they lack the maturity to handle it.

*Example:*               “Sorry, I can’t attend your meeting. It conflicts with my wife’s birthday and I’m planning to spend a night in the city with her. In choosing between your meeting and the dinner, I know you would want me to come down on the side of *romance*.”

## STYLE 3 - DOMINATION

Firm/Personal

You unilaterally induce, persuade, force compliance or resist.

The unilateral use of power and influence to gain compliance with your views.

*Common Sayings:*     “Father knows best.”  
                                      ”Do it!”

*Applications:*        When speed or confidentiality are important; when you believe that others involved have little to offer that would change your mind; or when the issue is too trivial to waste time discussing.

*Example:*                “Until you’ve been checked out on this equipment, here’s what I want you to do....”

## STYLE 4 - DECISION RULE

Moderately Firm/Impersonal

You jointly set objective rules that determine how differences will be handled.

The joint agreement to use an objective rule or external criterion (such as a coin flip, lottery, seniority system, voting procedure, test score, or arbitration) as the basis for deciding among competing views.

*Common Sayings:* “Play by the rules.” “Let’s be fair.”

*Applications:* When being fair and impartial is more important than the specific outcome of a disagreement; or when any of the proposed alternatives is better than a stalemate.

*Example:* “Of all those who want to work overtime next week, we need only two. Can we agree on a lottery for those of you who haven’t had a turn during the past year, or how about starting a seniority system for offering overtime assignments?”

## STYLE 5 - COEXISTENCE

Moderately Firm/Moderately Personal

You jointly establish a basis for both parties to maintain their differences.

The joint determination to follow separate paths without animosity. Use as an interim strategy when it's expensive or confusing to operate two different systems in parallel to accomplish the same purpose.

*Common Sayings:* "Let's agree to disagree." "You take the high road, and I'll take the low road."

*Applications:* When both parties believe they are right, more compelling evidence is needed to persuade one to change views, and a wrong decision could be irreversible or costly.

*Example:* "Let's agree to use both the current manual method and the new automated method for three months until we can see which is more cost-effective."

## STYLE 6 - BARGAINING

Moderately Firm/Personal

You jointly seek means to split differences, set trade-offs, or take turns.

Jointly seeking to exchange something one party wants for something the other party wants through offers and counter-offers.

*Common Sayings:*     “Half a loaf is better than none.”  
                                  “You scratch my back; I’ll scratch yours.”

*Applications:*        Use when each party can gain more from an exchange agreement than the best alternative available if no agreement is reached.

*Example:*                “When we relocate to the new building, if I can have a view office, I’m willing to reduce my space to make more room for a conference area.”

## STYLE 7 - NON-RESISTANCE

Flexible/Impersonal

You offer no resistance to the other party's views,  
blending your efforts with theirs.

Even though you disagree with the other person's views, you unilaterally decide to offer no resistance, and to support diligent implementation of required action.

*Common Sayings:* "Bend with the breeze."  
"Don't win the battle and lose the war."

*Applications:* Use when you believe the other person has greater expertise than you; or when the issue is minor to you but important to the other person and you want to be seen as a team player.

*Example:* "I've disagreed with my boss's last three ideas, and I don't like her latest proposal, but it's really a minor point in an issue that isn't critical."

## STYLE 8 - SUPPORTIVE RELEASE

Flexible/Moderately Personal

You unilaterally release the issue, stipulate any limits, and provide needed support.

Even though you disagree with the other person's views, you unilaterally decide to support and encourage that person's initiative within stipulated limits or conditions.

*Common Sayings:* "Time to try your wings and fly."  
"I support your right to be wrong."

*Applications:* Use when the other person is capable but lacks confidence, and you want to foster initiative and commitment.

*Example:* "Personally, I wouldn't tip off the competition by market-testing the product improvement in Cincinnati. But you've studied all the factors more closely than I and, as long as you stay within the budget, I'll go along with your judgment. Let's talk about your results in two weeks."

## STYLE 9 - COLLABORATION

Flexible/Personal

You jointly problem-solve to integrate views.

A joint exploration by participants aimed at developing a synthesis of all informed, relevant views. The integration of views is realized through frank discussion of interests, probing of assumptions, and by empathetic listening.

*Common Sayings:*     “Let us reason together.”  
                                      ”Two heads are better than one.”

*Applications:*        Use when the issues are too pivotal to be compromised; participants are trustworthy, capable, communicate skillfully, and have adequate time for discussion. Use also when participants want to develop a closer relationship, or when commitment of all parties to the selected course of action is important for a successful outcome.

*Example:*             “Our product has been implicated in two serious customer accidents. How are we to interpret these events? What action is appropriate for our company to take, and how shall we respond to questions that are being raised by the press?”

## IDENTIFY YOUR BLOCKS

Four blocks, in particular, interfere with the constructive resolution of differences. These blocks represent the extremes of viewpoint flexibility and interaction intensity. Both of these dimensions were shown on the chart on page 18. The following exercise will help you see if you are tripping over these blocks. Check those items below that *generally* apply to your handling of situations where disagreement is involved.

### **BLOCK 1: RIGID BEHAVIOR**

- I get so committed to my views that I have trouble knowing when to give in.
- Once I've stated my views openly, I don't like to say I've changed my mind.
- I don't take the time to draw out the opinions of others.
- It's difficult to admit when I'm wrong.

### **BLOCK 2: INDECISIVE BEHAVIOR**

- In groups, I don't break in if others are monopolizing the discussion.
- I'm willing to forego my position (opinion) to keep a harmonious relationship.
- Others often push past my views without giving them the consideration they deserve.
- I'd rather be a team player than to be the only one opposing a consensus.

### **BLOCK 3: ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR**

- I tend to take charge, even when it's not my responsibility.
- I protect my interests by maintaining a personal involvement.
- The best way to get things done the way I want is to do them myself.
- I like to be involved personally, even if it's not necessary to the task at hand.

### **BLOCK 4: RESERVED BEHAVIOR**

- I avoid confrontations that are likely to be emotionally charged.
- I avoid getting personally involved if I can delegate the responsibility.
- Even when others share their feelings, I remain calm and keep my feelings to myself.
- I prefer using logic over personal persuasion.

Where you have checkmarked two or more items for any "block," you may have picked up a dysfunctional personal style along the way. Blocks are usually rooted in childhood experiences and social conditioning. For example, you may have been taught by your parents to avoid differences by saying what is tactful over what is truthful. Or, you may have heard, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." However, to command a full range of interpersonal strategies, you must detect and reexamine those deeply etched messages from your past.

### Step 3. Plan Your Strategy

Depending on the situation and the personality of the stakeholders involved, you can select the best strategic style from the chart on page 18. Consider how FIRM or FLEXIBLE a stance you will take and the level of PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT desired. For example, if you decide on a FIRM stance and PERSONAL involvement, note that on the chart this indicates DOMINATION as the appropriate strategic style.

However, a single style may not serve your needs. Suppose, as in the example above, the suggested style is DOMINATION. But, you know that the situation requires a "softer" approach, so you may choose to combine SMOOTHING and DOMINATION. The chart is a reminder of the range of possibilities, and a tool to develop a workable strategy.

**Phase III: Preparation****Steps 1 & 2 Problem Solve and .... Practice, Practice , Practice!****Test What You Have Learned**

Using the problem-solving framework, resolve the following conflict.

**Case #2: Serving the Customer**

Pat is marketing manager for Transitex, a company that manufactures electronic products. After receiving two complaints, Pat phoned a random sample of recent customers and determined that the problem was not an isolated case. Several orders were shipped late, or errors were made in what was shipped. Some irate customers have already given their business to competitors.

Pat decided that this situation must be addressed now, and prevented from recurring in the future. With support from top management, Pat created a new position—Customer Coordinator—to check customer satisfaction systematically, determine if procedures need to be changed, and initiate corrective action.

The general attitude of most employees to Pat's announcement was, "This, too, will pass." The company frequently created improvement programs that proved ineffectual and later were dropped or withered away. Sensing that employees were at odds with the customer coordinator plan, Pat deferred interviewing candidates for the new position until the disagreement was resolved constructively.

If you were Pat, how would you handle that disagreement between management and the workers. Be sure to cover these five steps:

1. Clarify critical issues
2. Identify stakeholders
3. Assess likely sources of conflict
4. Recognize patterns and minimize blocks
5. Plan your strategy

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Dealing constructively with disagreement has enormous impact. It can lead to greater communication and productivity. It is important to remember that each individual is unique, and disagreements reflect that uniqueness. Acquiring a productive system for resolving differences can lead to greater personal and professional success.

## Phase IV: Implementation

**Step 1. Carry Out the Plan**

When people disagree and voice their views, an informed decision can be made. However, many people are reluctant to express disagreement openly in a variety of situations. They are concerned about hurting feelings, damaging relationships, and dealing with out-of-control emotional reactions.

The challenge in handling feelings is to allow them to be talked about openly. A line needs to be drawn between table-pounding rage that intimidates, and a simple statement that you are angry. Strong feelings can be used to bully, while unexpressed and unresolved feelings can bias good judgment. For example, people reject good ideas because they are angry with the individuals expressing them.

The more common concern, both in organizational and personal relationships, is unexpressed emotion. To the extent that you risk disclosing **your** feelings as you deal with differences, others will feel safer expressing what they are experiencing.

In summary, our feelings enable others to clarify misperceptions, and to join us in real rather than superficial relationships.

## Step 2. Evaluate Outcomes

The purpose of evaluation is twofold:

- 1.) to initiate any corrective or adaptive action that may be needed as the situation unfolds and hazy assumptions are clarified; and
- 2.) to learn from your experience so that future disagreements will be handled better.

## Step 3. Take Follow-up Action

Your evaluation will suggest if any follow-up action is needed. Obviously, if the outcome is off target, remedial action is appropriate. Even if a dispute is reconciled constructively, some monitoring and reinforcement helps assure that commitments will be kept.

Kindler, Herbert S., PhD. Managing Disagreements Constructively: Conflict Management in Organizations, New York: Crisp Publications, Inc, 1987.