

Workplace Conflict Management

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“Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.”

- Max Lucado

“The better able team members are to engage, speak, listen, hear, interpret, and respond constructively, the more likely their teams are to leverage conflict than be leveled by it.”

- Runde and Flanagan



Session Objectives



- Discuss causes of conflict in the workplace
- Discuss costs of conflict in the workplace
- Provide strategies for leaders to utilize to manage conflict in the workplace

Why do we need to
know how to
manage conflict?

Conflict is costly...

- Can lead to poor morale
- Impacts productivity
- Negative impact on customers/persons served
- Financial impact
- Stifles creativity/innovation



Common causes of conflict in the workplace

- Lack of communication/ miscommunication
- Misunderstandings
- Differences
- Poor word choices
- Ineffective management styles
- Unclear roles/responsibilities
- False expectations
- Poor leadership



10 strategies to handle conflict in the workplace

Source: *Resolving Conflicts at Work*, 3rd ed., by Kenneth Cloke & Joan Goldsmith



Strategy #1:

Understand the culture & dynamics of conflict

- Every conflict is significantly influenced by the culture and dynamics in which it takes place. When you can better understand your organization's culture and the dynamics involved in the conflict, you are more readily able to move toward a resolution.
- The Culture of Conflict
 - Every workplace generates spoken and unspoken rules about what people should and should not say and do when they are in conflict.

Does your culture look like this ?...

- Regards any new idea with suspicion
- Ask departments, divisions, or individuals to challenge & criticize each other's proposals
- Express your criticisms freely, and withhold praise
- Treat identification of problems as signs of failure
- Control everything carefully (micro-manage)
- Make decisions to reorganize or change policies in secret
- Assign to a lower-level manager, in the name of delegation and participation, responsibility for figuring out how to cut back, lay off, move people around, or otherwise implement threatening decisions you make

...Or does it look like this?

- Culture of :
 - Openness
 - Honesty
 - Dialogue
 - Collaboration
 - Negotiation
 - Conflict resolution
 - The ability to learn from our conflicts & our opponents

Tips for building a “good” culture of conflict:

- Empathize with opponents & colleagues, and acknowledge their contributions to your learning & development
- Discuss disagreements (don't sweep them under the rug!)
- Be self-critical about the role you have played in conflicts
- Agree not to engage in insults, accusations, or attacks on others
- Encourage opponents & colleagues to let go of unresolved grievances
- Build consensus over vision, mission, goals, ground rules, & shared values
- Reach out to communicate across cultural boundaries
- Encourage opponents & coworkers to honestly & empathetically communicate their thoughts & feelings about how you interact with each other
- Publicly invite opponents & colleagues to engage in dialogue and collaborative negotiation/mediation to solve problems
- Collaboratively identify elements of your culture that are blocking or supporting resolution & continually improve them

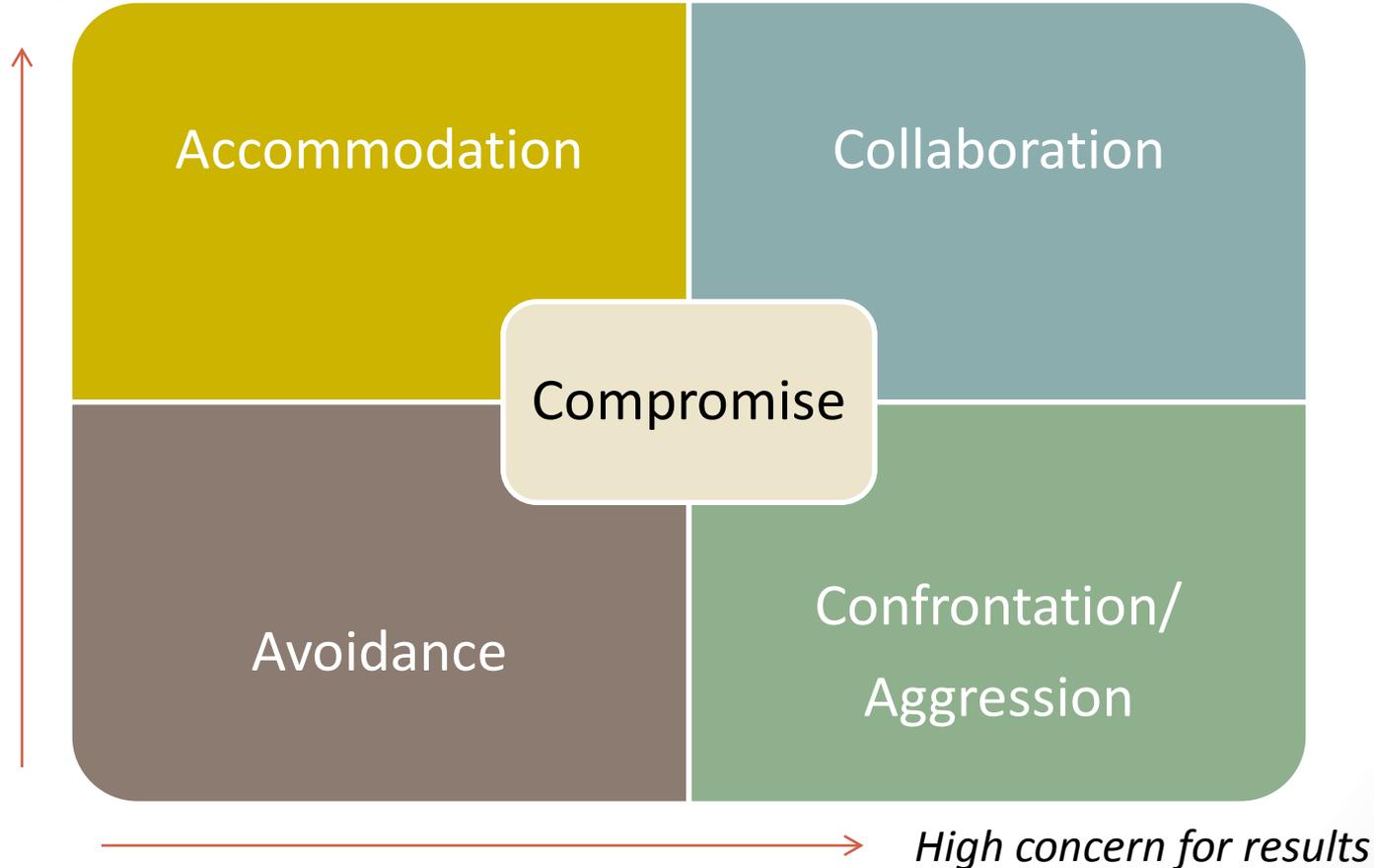
The Dynamics of Conflict

- The most common responses to conflict are:
 - Avoidance
 - Accommodation
 - Aggression
 - Compromise
 - Collaboration

Activity: Conflict Management Styles Quiz

What's your conflict management style?

High concern for people



Conflict Management Style Breakdown

- **Collaborating style:** Problems are solved in ways in which an optimum result is provided for all involved. Both sides get what they want and negative feelings are minimized.
 - *Pros:* Creates mutual trust; maintains positive relationships; builds commitments
 - *Cons:* Time consuming; energy consuming
- **Competing style:** Authoritarian approach.
 - *Pros:* Goal oriented; quick
 - *Cons:* May breed hostility
- **Avoiding style:** The non-confrontational approach.
 - *Pros:* Does not escalate conflict; postpones difficulty
 - *Cons:* Unaddressed problems; unresolved problems

- **Harmonizing style:** Giving in to maintain relationships.
 - *Pros:* Minimizes injury when we are outmatched; relationships are maintained
 - *Cons:* Breeds resentment; exploits the weak
- **Compromising style:** The middle ground approach.
 - *Pros:* Useful in complex issues without simple solutions; all parties are equal in power
 - *Cons:* No one is every really satisfied; less than optimal solutions get implemented

When is **Avoidance** effective?

- Where damage due to conflict outweighs its benefits
- In order to cool down, reduce tensions, or regain composure
- When the need to gather information outweighs the need to make an immediate decision

When is **Competing** effective?

- To achieve quick, decisive action
- In an emergency
- To enforce unpopular rules or discipline
- When the issues are vital and one knows one is right

When is Accommodation effective?

- When one is wrong, or to show one is reasonable
- When the issue is more important to others, in order to establish good will
- To preserve harmony or avoid disruption
- To help subordinates develop by letting them learn from their mistakes

When is **Compromise** effective?

- When opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals
- To achieve a temporary settlement of complex issues
- To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure
- As a backup when competition or collaboration fails

When is Collaboration effective?

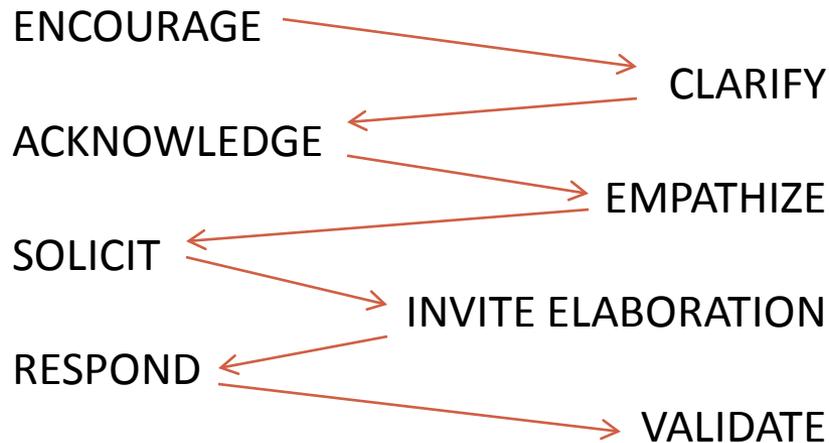
- To find an integrative solution when both sides find it difficult to compromise
- When the objective is to learn
- To merge insights from different perspectives
- When long-range solutions are required
- To gain commitment by consensus
- To empower one or both participants
- To work through hard feelings
- To model cooperative solutions for subordinates
- To solve problems between people who work closely together
- To improve morale
- To increase motivation & productivity
- When a team effort is required
- When creative solutions are needed
- When all other methods fail

Strategy #2:

Listen Empathetically and Responsively

- Another strategy for conflict resolution is developing the ability & helping your organization develop the ability to speak and listen more effectively.

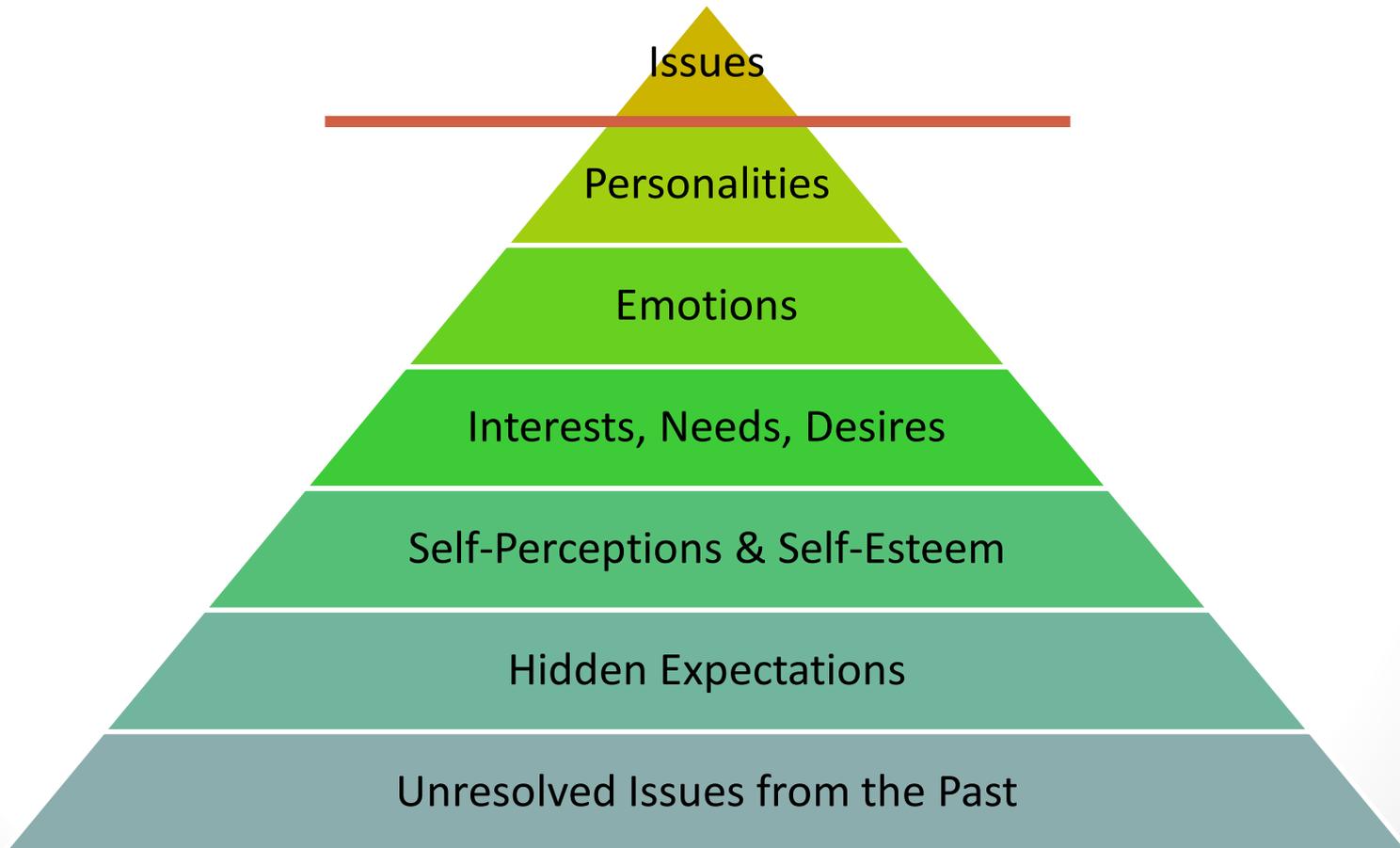
Techniques for making a real connection to the speaker:



Strategy # 3:

Search Beneath the Surface for Hidden Meanings

The Iceberg of Conflict



How to get “below the surface”:

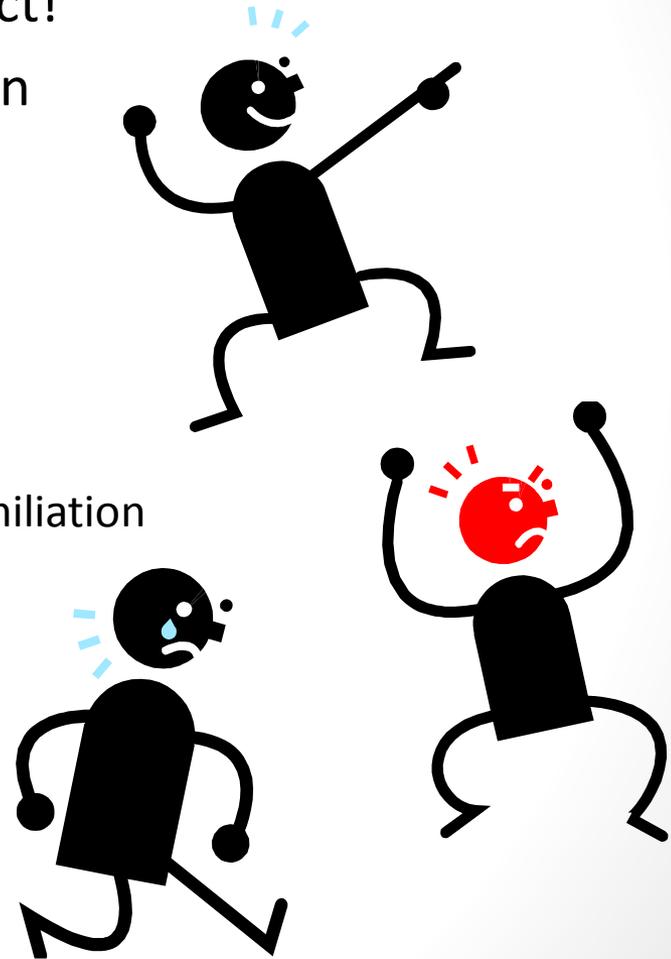
- Ask the other person for permission to ask questions
- Adopt a gentle, respectful, empathetic attitude, no matter what
- Listen actively and nonjudgmentally to their answers
- Invite the other person to join you in exploring deeper underlying issues
- Welcome the resulting insights
- Thank the other person for his/her responses
- Take his/her remarks seriously



Strategy # 4:

Acknowledge and Release Emotions

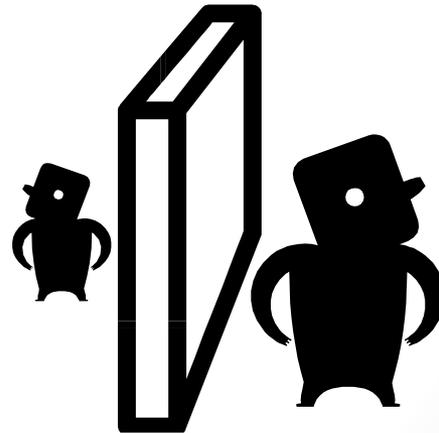
- Unexpressed emotions create conflict!
- Acknowledge and affirm the emotion
 - How intense is the emotion?
 - Anger: From Irritation to Rage
 - Depression: From Sadness to Grief
 - Happiness: From Joy to Rapture
 - Fear: From Anxiety to Paralysis
 - Shame: From Embarrassment to Humiliation
 - Love: From Infatuation to Passion
 - Hatred: From Dislike to Loathing



Strategy # 5:

Separate What Matters from What Gets in the Way

In conflicts, there is a tendency to lump all the issues that upset us into a mass of indistinguishable complaints that are intertwined and difficult to understand, negotiate, fix, or resolve on their own. Simply creating distinctions or “separations” between the core issues in conflict can produce a shift, allowing us to approach them constructively.



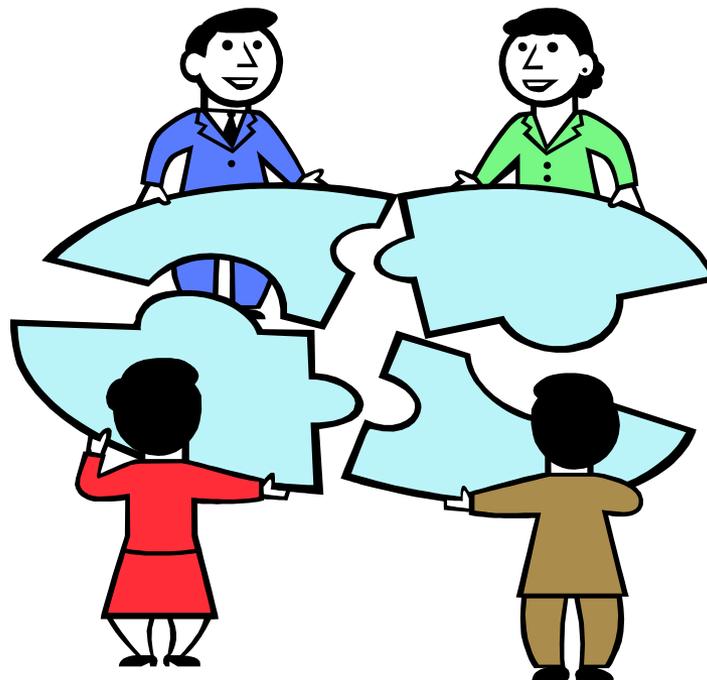
Separate...

- Separate **positions** (what the parties want) from **interests** (why they want it)
- Separate **people** from **problems**
- Separate **problems** from **solutions**
- Separate **commonalities** from **differences**
- Separate **future** from **past**
- Separate **emotions** from **negotiation**
- Separate **process** from **content**
- Separate **options** from **choices**
- Separate **criteria** from **selection**

Strategy #6:

Solve Problems Paradoxically and Creatively

- Solve problems paradoxically:
 - Recognize the multiple, typically conflicting truths that shape and inform problems.
 - Paradoxical solutions are always at least two-sided



- Solve problems creatively:
 1. Admit the problem, recognize it as a problem, and accept it as needing to be solved
 2. Collaboratively define and clarify the elements/nature of the problem
 3. Jointly investigate, analyze, categorize, and prioritize the problem
 4. Invent solutions that satisfy everyone's interests without becoming attached to any particular solution
 5. Jointly act, evaluate results, acknowledge efforts, and celebrate success!

Strategy #7:

Learn from Difficult Behaviors

- Most people see problems as stemming from difficult people and personalities. The real problem is with difficult *behaviors*.
 - Ex: stubbornness, refusal to cooperate, negativity, lying, etc.
- The goal is to identify the chronic behavioral problems within the organization & develop the skills needed to address them.

Where do difficult behaviors come from?

- Sometimes difficult behaviors are rewarded by offering the person the attention they have been craving & have been unable to receive through positive behaviors.
- Behaviors may also be a diversion to draw attention away from the fact that the person is working beyond his/her capacity or skill, and are afraid of being fired.
- A person may also be blamed for not fitting into an environment that is not meeting their needs (i.e. not responding well to conflict, avoiding/suppressing conflict) which causes conflict to reemerge in the form of difficult behavior.
- Instinctive negative responses to difficult behaviors may reinforce or perpetuate them (the “misbehaving child” gets the most attention). Instead, LISTEN empathetically to them without supporting what they did.

How do I deal with difficult behaviors?

1. Surface the conflict
2. Conflict coaching
3. Teamwork
4. Process awareness
5. Constructive feedback
6. Problem solving
7. Shared responsibility
8. Support for change
9. Constructive attitude toward problems

Strategy #8:

Lead and Coach for Transformation

- Conflicts in the workplace call for leaders who can envision and incite collaboration, even with the worse opponents; leaders who model conflict resolution skills and attitudes in the midst of disagreements; who teach and coach others in strategies for dispute resolution; and are able to transform attitudes within their organization.
 - We call these “transformational leaders”



Competencies of Conflict-Resolving Leaders

Leaders who are willing to surface & resolve conflicts require a unique set of leadership competencies:

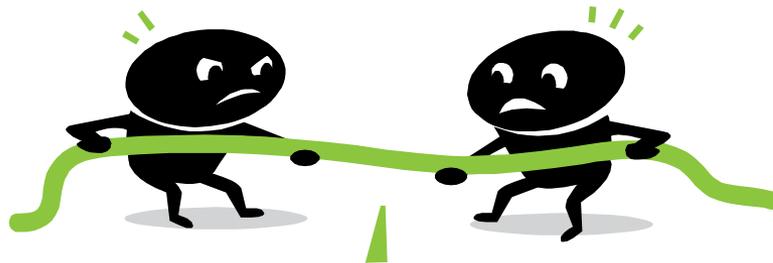
Leaders....

1. Master the context
2. Know themselves
3. Create a vision for the future
4. Communicate with meaning
5. Maintain trust through integrity
6. Realize intention through action

Strategy #9:

Explore Resistance and Negotiate Collaboratively

- Typical reasons for resistance in conflict resolution:
 - Perceptions that the process used to resolve conflict is one-sided or unfair
 - Lack of commitment to follow through
 - No adequate ground rules
 - Too structured or formal (or vice versa)
 - Lack of authenticity or honesty in the process
 - Lack of empathetic listening during the process
 - A process that attempts to blame or humiliate
 - Stifled communication during the process
 - Unresolved issues haven't been uncovered
 - Both parties blame the other for having to go through the process



- To avoid resistance:
 - Have everyone involved in planning changes
 - Have a roadmap for what you hope to achieve
 - Effective leadership to carry out the changes
 - Goals/outcomes clearly defined
 - Small changes tested first
 - False expectations are corrected
 - People who resist change are won over by having their interests met
 - Listen to all parties involved with a neutral ear
 - Feedback, evaluation, and self-correction are built into the process

Strategy #10:

Mediate & Design Systems for Prevention

- Mediation is the unifying element & final recourse for every strategy mentioned thus far.
 - Mediation is an informal problem-solving conversation conducted by an experienced 3rd-party neutral.
 - It is a voluntary, consensus-based approach that uses communication, emotional processing, creative problem solving, collaborative negotiation, brainstorming, and impasse resolution... Everything we just discussed!
 - Mediation is successful!
On average mediators resolve 85-95% of the disputes they address.



- Organizations can also design their own conflict resolution systems & processes that are tailored to their unique organizational needs:
 - Some commonly used procedures for system design:
 - Informal problem solving
 - Peer counseling, coaching, mentoring
 - Team building
 - Facilitated meetings
 - Circles & group meetings
 - Participatory feedback & evaluation
 - Open forums
 - Peer & professional mediation
 - Internal appeals boards
 - Binding/nonbinding arbitration
 - Review boards

Questions?

