Got conflict? Sure you do. We’ve all experienced conflict at some point or another. The million-dollar question is: How can you effectively manage conflict?

First, let’s define conflict. Conflict describes the collision of divergent ideas, interests, or people.

As the definition suggests, no two conflicts are alike. That would explain why there are no hard-and-fast rules for preventing and resolving conflict. There are, however, some tried-and-true best practices for managing conflict. Fisher and Ury (1991) prescribe the following steps:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Separate the people from the problem.
3. Focus on interests, not positions.
4. Invent options for mutual gain.
5. Insist on using objective criteria.

Now let’s apply these steps to the following example to see how they can be used in the real world:

You and a colleague are partnering on designing a brochure for a new initiative that you’re co-managing. You don’t like the color scheme that’s been proposed, but your partner does. Frustration about your disagreement is taking its toll.

1. **Identify the problem**—The proverbial elephant in this room appears to be a difference of opinion. By taking a minute to step back, assess the situation, and determine what’s hindering attainment of your shared goal, you’ll be well on your way to successful conflict management.
2. **Separate the people from the problem**—You’re not really mad at your colleague, are you? While your colleague may seem like the problem, in reality, he or she is not. The “problem” is the barrier to accomplishing your shared goal, which in this case is disagreement about the color scheme for your webpage.

3. **Focus on interests, not positions**—You don’t like the color scheme—that’s your position. Your interest, on the other hand, is to get the brochure completed on schedule and in accordance with quality standards.

4. **Invent options for mutual gain**—Instead of holding up progress because you don’t like the color scheme, do something about it! Constructively share your concerns about the color scheme (e.g., it deviates too much from the practice’s brand) and offer suggestions for consideration (it might help to incorporate elements from your colleague’s preferred color scheme).

5. **Insist on using objective criteria**—As you and your colleague explore color scheme options, keep your emotions at bay and allow objectivity to guide your decision-making (and that elephant out of the room…). This approach will be most effective if ponder why you care (i.e., why does the color scheme matter?) then express your thoughts with mutual agreement that “just ‘cause” won’t get it done.

Will you remember each of these steps in the heat of the moment? Probably not. What you should remember, though, is to keep your emotions at bay. This is often easier said than done, but you can do it! Here’s how:

- **Take a minute to calm down.** Breathe, count to 10 (or 100!), pace—whatever works for you.
- **Sleep on it.** If your response to the conflict can wait, let it. Get a good night’s rest and revisit it tomorrow.
- **Take a walk in the other party’s shoes.** You will likely gain a fresh perspective—enlightenment that could guide you to a mutually beneficial solution.

Checking your emotions will help you to appropriately channel your energy for the “crucial” that will likely ensue. If you’re unfamiliar with the term, a crucial conversation is “a discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong” (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler, 2002, p. 3). Sometimes crucial conversations are simply necessary.
When managed well, these dialogues can lead to productive outcomes. Following are some tips for navigating crucial conversations (Patterson et al., 2002):

**The “What” Skills**
- Offer your observations and feelings about the situation.
- Share what your observations and feelings have led you to conclude about the situation.
- Encourage the other party to share his or her perspective.

**The “How” Skills**
- When sharing your observations, lay the foundation for testing your assumptions with the other party by using language that does not present your perspective as fact (e.g., “it seems…”; “my impression…”; etc.)
- Zip your lips and open your ears to give the other party a chance to be heard—even if their perspective differs from yours.

Finally, if you ever feel that you need coaching for managing a difficult situation, reach out to your manager or a situational mentor.

**References**
