

Top 10 Dispute Resolution Skills

With the help of our top 10 dispute resolution skills, you can cover all the bases the next time you are trying to bring a complex conflict to an end.

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Too often, dispute resolution can be an acrimonious and unproductive process. The following 10 [negotiation](#) and [conflict resolution strategies](#) can help you find creative ways to reach mutually satisfactory agreements:

- 1. Listen to Learn.** One of the most important conflict negotiation strategies you can adopt is to listen actively to your counterpart's concerns. To do so, you will need to resist the urge to interrupt and defend yourself. Instead, ask questions aimed at drawing out the other party's core issues. Repeat back what you've heard to ensure that you understand the other person's perspective. Only after you've gained a thorough sense of their perspective should you start presenting your own point of view.
- 2. Bring Multiple Issues to the Table.** Parties in conflict often find themselves fixated on a single issue, arguing back and forth. When you add multiple issues to the discussion during the [dispute resolution process](#), you may be able to find opportunities to make tradeoffs and concessions based on your differing interests. In addition, try presenting several proposals that you value similarly, each covering multiple interests. The other party's reaction will help you ensure you are addressing their needs in addition to your own.
- 3. Brainstorm Solutions Jointly.** Disputants tend to assume that one party's gain is the other party's loss, but this often doesn't have to be the case in dispute resolution. Try to lessen the tension by framing your dispute-resolution effort as an opportunity to reach a solution that will satisfy all parties involved—a true win-win.
- 4. Recognize Power Plays for What They Are.** Disputants sometimes challenge or denigrate one another's power, experience, or skills with the aim of feeling superior or getting the upper hand. Don't fall for such petty ploys. Instead, make it clear that you recognize the attempted manipulation for what it is, and try to return the conversation to the issue at hand.
- 5. Reexamine "Sacred" Issues.** Parties in conflict sometimes categorically refuse to negotiate on issues they deem sacred, such as those that have a moral, religious, or personal dimension. Yet we are sometimes willing to make concessions on such issues under certain circumstances. Before declaring an issue to be off-limits, think about ways of settling the dispute that might honor your deepest values.
- 6. Guard Against Threats.** In the heat of the moment, disputants sometimes resort to threats, whether to try to get what they want or simply to be heard. But threats typically escalate conflict and make matters worse. When threatened, try ignoring the threat, as this can give the other party a chance to retreat from it. If that doesn't work, other strategies for [conflict resolution](#) can include naming the threat and suggesting that you try to follow a more constructive path together.

7. Recognize When You Need a Mediator. When a dispute resolution effort is highly acrimonious or seems headed toward a lawsuit, it's often smart to enlist a mediator or other unbiased third party to help manage the conflict. Mediators can serve as buffers and encourage more rational decision making. Similarly, experts in a particular field can provide data that shifts the discussion in a more productive direction—just be sure to choose those experts jointly.

8. Appeal to Shared Values. If you find yourself in a dispute over values, look for common ground by identifying broader values that you share with your counterpart. For example, parties who are arguing about a hot-button political issue could emphasize their shared commitment to peaceful disagreement and freedom of expression.

9. Center Discussions on Gains Rather than Losses. Negotiators tend to become overly competitive when they concentrate on what they might lose in their dispute resolution. For this reason, it pays to instead frame discussions and proposals on what each party might gain. This type of “gain frame” can promote greater collaboration. For example, if you and your counterpart would need to make joint financial sacrifices to reach a resolution, you might emphasize the opportunities you have to strengthen your relationship over the long term and learn from past mistakes.

10. Keep Lines of Communication Open. Dispute resolution can become so rancorous that both sides need a break—but don't let that break turn into a permanent impasse if agreement would still benefit you both. Instead, keep in touch via email, at the very least, and periodically broach the possibility of resuming talks. You might be able to rebuild trust by negotiating relatively minor issues, such as where to meet.

What dispute resolution tips would you add to our list?