

YES, NO, or I'LL THINK ABOUT IT

(Two Tips for Resolving Any Conflict)

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Whether in a divorce, a workplace dispute, or a conflict with a neighbor, it's easy to get caught up in defending our own behavior and point of view. In a conflict, people can "push our buttons," and it's easy to react before we know it. The focus can quickly become personal and about the past.

To avoid this problem, there's a simple, two-step method that seems to help, no matter what type of conflict you are in. If you think you are going to be in a difficult situation, remind yourself of these two steps before you start talking. And if you are in the middle of an argument, you can always shift to this approach.

1) First Person: MAKE A PROPOSAL

Whatever has happened before is less important than what to do now. Avoid trying to emphasize how bad the problem is or criticizing the other person's past actions. There's nothing he or she can do about the past now. This just triggers defensiveness. Plus, people never agree on what happened in the past anyway. Instead, picture a solution and propose it.

For example, in a divorce dispute: "If you're going to be late to pick up the kids on Fridays, then I propose we just change the pickup time to a more realistic time. Instead of 5pm, let's make it 6:30pm."

Or in a workplace dispute: "I propose that we talk to our manager about finding a better cubicle for you, since you have so many phone calls that need to be made and I often hear them."

2) Second Person: YES, NO, or I'LL THINK ABOUT IT

All you have to do to respond to such a proposal is say: "Yes." "No." or "I'll think about it." You always have the right to say: "Yes." "No." or "I'll think about it." Of course, there are consequences to each choice, but you always have these three choices at least. Here's some examples of each:

YES: "Yes, I agree. Let's do that." And then stop! No need to save face, evaluate the other person's proposal, or give the other person some negative feedback. Just let it go. After all, if you have been personally criticized or attacked, it's not about you. Personal attacks are not problem-solving. They are about the person making the hostile attack. You are better off to ignore everything else.

NO: "No, I don't want to change the pickup time. I'll try to make other arrangements to get there on time. Let's keep it as is." Just keep it simple. Avoid the urge to defend your decision or criticize the other person's idea. You said no. You're done. Let it drop.

I'LL THINK ABOUT IT: "I don't know about your proposal, but I'll think about it. I'll get back to you tomorrow about your idea. Right now I have to get back to work. Thanks for making a proposal." Once again, just stop the discussion there. Avoid the temptation to discuss it at length, or question the validity of the other person's point of view. It is what it is.

When you say "I'll think about it," you are respecting the other person. It calms people down to know you are taking them seriously enough to think about what they said. This doesn't mean you will agree. It just means you'll think about it.

MAKE A NEW PROPOSAL: After you think about it, you can always make a new proposal. Perhaps you'll think of a new approach that neither of you thought of before. Try it out. You can always propose anything. (But remember there are consequences to each proposal.) And you can always respond: "Yes." "No." or "I'll think about it." (And there are consequences to each of those choices, too.)

AVOID MAKING IT PERSONAL

In the heat of the conflict, it's easy to react and criticize the other person's proposals—or even to criticize the other person personally, such as saying that he or she is arrogant, ignorant, stupid, crazy or evil. It's easy and natural to want to say: "You're so stupid it makes me sick." Or: "What are you, crazy?" "Your proposal is the worst idea I have ever heard." But if you want to end the dispute and move on, just ask for a proposal and respond "Yes" "No" or "I'll think about it."

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