Two Ways of Managing Conflict: Our Default Approach and the Dignity Approach

“Conflict is a signal that there is something about ourselves and the relationship that needs to change”

**Default Approach:** The dignity model assumes that we have blind spots and that we may not always be aware of the ways we are harming others. The Default Approach is our hardwired, survival method of resolving conflict, driven by our self-protective “Me.”

When we have a bad interaction with someone, our default reaction—one that is driven by our self-protective “Me,” is to:

1. Assume we are an innocent victim; that we had nothing to do with what gave rise to the conflict
2. Point out all the things the other person did that caused the conflict
3. Deflect any and all responsibility
4. Fight with the person and/or distance ourselves and withdraw from the relationship
5. Denigrate the person by gossiping about him or her through the underground network

**Dignity Approach:** This approach requires us to engage our “I,” the part of ourselves that is capable of overriding the instinctive, self-protective emotional reactions of the “Me,” and can see the broader perspective, which includes the experience of the other. Unlike the Default Approach, whose goal is strictly self-preservation, the dignity approach aims to use conflict to deepen the relationship and to promote mutual learning.

**Step One: Commitment to “Working it Out”**

1. Make a commitment to yourself and your family, friends, colleagues that if conflicts arise, you will both try to “work it out” instead of resorting to the default approach by writing the person off.

2. Agree that the relationship is important enough to you that if you violate each other’s dignity (knowingly or unknowingly) that you will do what it takes to restore the relationship.
Step Two:

1. Talk to the person and let her or him know that there is something you are upset about.
2. Explain in dignity terms, what violation you have experienced. You can begin by saying, “you may not be aware of it but when you did........it felt (name the violation. For example, it felt like I was excluded, treated unfairly, misunderstood, etc.)
3. “I want to give you the benefit of the doubt that there might be something about why you did what you did that I don’t understand. There may be more to the story than I know. I’d like to know more about your perspective.”
4. Exploring your contribution: assume that there might be something you have done that has contributed to the conflict.
5. Acknowledge and apologize for the harm that one or both have done.
6. Discuss the new learning that came out of the process.
7. Make a mutual commitment to change the hurtful behavior.

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