



## Competence 1: CONFLICT RESOLUTION - How to Stop the Cycle of Disrespect

### Conflict Resolution » How to Stop the Cycle of Disrespect

How do you react when someone is disrespectful towards you at work? It's easy to get caught in a cycle of disrespect because our natural inclination is to respond aggressively or defensively.

This is because human beings tend to mirror each other. But with negative behaviours like disrespect, we often go a step further and escalate the situation. For example:

When a coworker is disrespectful towards me, I respond in kind and I add a little. This is just to make sure they get the message to stop.

- **Then they respond in kind, adding a little.**
- **I respond in kind, adding a little more.**
- **And so on...**

As a communication facilitator, I teach people to avoid giving in to the cycle of disrespect by responding in respectful and assertive ways. And yet, there are times when I don't practice what I teach. Instead, I retaliate by showing the other person my own disrespectful behaviour. For example, there was a time when a coworker yelled at me, saying something extremely vague and negative about my work. And for the next six months, I only communicated with her when necessary.

What do you think? Was my response justified? Did I react too strongly? Too timidly?

My point is that, justified or not, my response gave me more of what I didn't want.

The most direct way to stop the cycle of disrespect is to refuse to copy disrespectful behaviour.

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Although it's natural to want to retaliate when we've been wronged, the best way to counter disrespectful behaviour is to respond with respect. Only then can we break the unhealthy cycle of disrespect.



## **Five Steps to End the Cycle of Disrespect:**

### **1) DETERMINE THAT THE DISRESPECTFUL BEHAVIOUR WILL END WITH YOU.**

It often helps to recognize that if you're not able to resolve things, you'll need the outside help of someone like a supervisor. If you retaliate, any investigating authority might end up confused as to who's in the wrong. Some will punish you both – some will feel so mystified that they will do nothing.

### **2) TAKE SOME TIME AWAY BEFORE YOU RESPOND.**

Allow yourself enough time for the retaliation impulse to subside. Breathe deeply, tell the other person that you're going to think about what they've brought up, and excuse yourself.

### **3) FACE THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE NEEDS TO MEET:**

When you find yourself wanting to reflect disrespectful behaviour back to the person, it's a sign that you've been hurt – either professionally, logistically, or emotionally. The retaliation you're fantasizing about is your brain's attempt to design a future where you won't get hurt again. Avoid giving in to the cycle of disrespect by meeting your needs in more productive ways: practice self-care, redefine your relationship with the other person (see point four), and/or set boundaries (see point five).

### **4) USE MIRRORING TO YOUR ADVANTAGE:**

People don't just mirror disrespectful behaviours – they mirror positive ones as well. So be a leader and redefine your relationship with the person by acting professionally and respectfully. Nothing sends a more powerful message about what you believe is acceptable than when you refuse to stoop to their level.

Note: If you're experiencing disrespect from a supervisor, they may assume your lack of retaliation is because you're intimidated by them. You may have to indicate what you're doing by saying things like, "Because I always want to be respected and I know you do too, I'm going to respond in this way," or "I can tell this is upsetting and I understand why you're angry, but I want to respond calmly so we can talk it out." Even a simple, "Hey, let's talk about this," can signal that you're making an intentional shift in the conversation.

### **5) PREPARE AN ASSERTIVE, BOUNDARY-SETTING RESPONSE:**

Another way to use mirroring to your advantage is to set boundaries. It's likely that the other person's disrespectful behaviour is their attempt to get their needs met, albeit in an unprofessional way. Demonstrate how professionals can get what they need from each other



by setting clear, assertive boundaries. If you don't have much experience doing this, write out what you want to say or talk it over with a trusted friend.

The most direct way to stop the cycle of disrespect is to refuse to copy disrespectful behaviour. We need to resist the impulse to retaliate by taking the time to calm down, modeling respectful behaviour, setting clear boundaries, and, occasionally, explaining what we're doing. While there's no way to guarantee that your coworker will become respectful, at the very least you can feel good about how you've responded. This will make it easier for management to see that it's you that deserves to be protected if they need to intervene.