

Compromise, Competition, and Collaboration: Conflict Resolution 2020

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To promote wellness, the School of Veterinary Medicine (SVM) at USU offered a conflict resolution certificate program comprised of three sessions of lecture and discussion led by Canfield and SVM Director of Wellness Chris Chapman. Students completed the program on Jan. 29, whereas faculty and staff met separately to complete their certification on Feb. 5.

Weeks earlier, the students, faculty and staff began the program by selecting and ranking core values in order of personal importance. To complete the exercise, participants pared down a list of 83 values including authority, purpose, tradition, industry, popularity, creativity, intimacy, independence, and more using a set of printed cards to help them physically visualize their ranking order.

"It helps you figure out what you hold important and why you do what you do," said Lauren Frary, a second-year student. "I came to learn more about managing conflict both personally and professionally."

A recent addition to the USU SVM faculty, Beth Granger said, "I think this training is invaluable. As a veterinarian, you're an employee, a boss, and a doctor. You not only have to deal with superiors, but also with support staff and clients."

Canfield encouraged program attendees to reconsider how they see conflict. He said conflict is part of any relationship — working or otherwise — and how we treat those we are in conflict with is critical to success.

"You can never change anything from a defensive position," Canfield said. "I haven't changed my mind. I haven't changed my behavior. I haven't changed my clothes."

VOCAB served as an acronym to remember tools of conflict resolution: "V" for vulnerability, "O" for ownership, "C" for communication, "A" for acceptance, and "B" for boundaries.

Canfield said being vulnerable is about opening up and demonstrating trust, but vulnerability is counterintuitive in conflict. Ownership is the opposite of laying blame or making unfair accusations in conflict.

"Have you ever been successful after blaming someone enough," Canfield said. "The gift of ownership is empowerment. You can take ownership to the extreme. It is not heroic to do for other people what they can and should do for themselves."

During the program's second session, students engaged with Canfield by asking questions about their experiences with conflict. Of particular interest to students were scenarios where they perceived those in conflict with them as being manipulative or unreasonable.

Chapman addressed these concerns when he said communication processes are the ways we express our thoughts and feelings when in conflict, and he labeled manipulative behavior in conflict as "the dark arts." Chapman urged students to avoid the dark arts entirely because they don't produce the changes one wants.

Acceptance relates to relinquishing control of people and situations you can't control, according to Canfield.

"When you're in conflict and you're trying to control someone else it's frustrating and it doesn't work," Canfield said. "Attempts to control are acts of violence."

Finally, individuals in conflict need to set boundaries for the benefit of all involved because boundaries represent deeply important or personal values, Canfield said.

Students asked questions about how to set the boundaries of dialogue and what to do when someone was abusive in their requests. Chapman said that conflicts that are difficult to resolve usually come down to differing values, and that no conflict can be solved by an agreement that violates a person's core values.

"Anytime you get stuck, a good, open, honest question is, 'Can you help me understand?'" Canfield said.

If someone is set on using manipulation or refuses to explain their boundaries, Chapman said you have to accept that they have made their choice and you can't change their mind.

Wellness has been a focus for the school of veterinary medicine in recent months. The latest edition of the USU School of Veterinary Medicine Magazine will be centered on the dual issues of mental health and wellness among veterinarians.

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