

Reducing Conflict 18 Reverse Roles

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



When two people are in conflict, sometimes it is helpful to reverse roles. The technique usually helps because it shifts the perspective of both people as they try to articulate the points made by their opponent. There is one very large caveat with this method that I will reveal later in this article.

I believe the method is helpful primarily because it forces both people to listen carefully to the points made by the other person. If you are my opponent in the disagreement, the only way I can assume your side is to fully understand what it is. That means I need to listen enough to your point of view to describe it once the roles are reversed. The same phenomenon occurs with you trying to argue for my points.

Often times just getting ready to reverse the roles forces a level of understanding that was absent when we were just shouting at each other. That may lead to a creative solution that is a third point of view, or I may come to realize your logic was better than mine. Either way, we can put the disagreement behind us and move on.

The caveat is that both sides need to play the game fairly, or it will not work. I learned that lesson early in my career when I had a disagreement with an engineer named Frank over how to accomplish the installation of a new packaging line. Frank wanted to keep an adjacent line running while we installed the new one. I favored building up enough inventory so we could shut down the adjacent line in order to have a safer installation process.

We were at loggerheads one afternoon in his office. Both of us were so convinced that our way was better that we made little progress toward a resolution for over an hour. Finally, I said, "We are not getting anywhere here, why don't we reverse roles to see if that shifts our thinking?" Frank said, "That seems a little childish, but I will play along with you. You go first."

I shifted my mental process over to advocate for his side. I went down the six reasons he had given for why his approach was best. Frank listened and nodded as if to say, "Right, that was the point I was making."

I then said, "OK I spelled out your side, now it is time for you to advocate for my way." Frank leveled me with the following statement, "Well, Bob, I was going to advocate for

the opposite approach, but listening carefully to the points you just gave, I have to agree that what you described makes the most sense.” I lost the argument

Actually, by stepping back and playing the reverse role game, we were both able to see a third pathway that had elements of the advantages of both approaches. Essentially, we came up with a third possibility that was better than either of the two opposing views.

You can use the reverse role technique if you are the mediator between two people who are at odds; just make sure that both people play fairly.

Free Video

Here is a 3-minute video that contains more information on the technique of reversing roles.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQjWLy_0l48

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