

Reducing Conflict 68 Best Intent

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Years ago, I discovered that if you train people to assume best intent, it helps reduce conflict. In this article, I will describe why the technique is so effective and give an example.

What is best intent?

When something appears to be amiss, we instinctively think someone is out to hoodwink us. We jump to the conclusion that the person has ill intent. That means the person is consciously trying to get on our nerves. If you can set aside your skepticism, it allows you to imagine a more positive cause as possible. Let's take a real example to see how this happens.

Case example

I got an email from George this afternoon. He said he could no longer attend a birthday party he had previously committed to. I figured he was just making life miserable for me. I had chided him the day before for coming in late. Now he is not going to show up at the party tonight, and I will have to come up with an excuse. I felt like writing him back that this is the last time I will be inviting him to an event.

Suppose that before my anger boiled over, I took a different attitude. George may have had a perfectly valid reason for having to back out of my party. Maybe his father fell last night and George has to take him home from the hospital tonight. I could hold my anger in check for a while and assume George had the best intent. I would not have snapped back at him and precipitated a tussle.

There are usually two sides to every story

Our perspective is based on a lot of things. We rarely have all of the facts, especially when many people are working remotely. It is easy to assign blame for a situation that may have an innocent cause. How would you convince people to be slower to jump to conclusions?

Establish some rules about assuming best intent

Get folks together and talk about this issue. Reason with them that the atmosphere at work can be a lot better if we refrain from blaming people. Take the time to be sure of all the factors. Model this kinder behavior yourself and see if it helps improve the environment.

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