

Living with Conflict in Recreation

By Del Albright, BlueRibbon Ambassador

"You can run but you can't hide!" These words were made famous in the 1980's movie, "Top Gun" with Tom Cruise. It had to do with aerial combat training, but this wisdom also applies to conflict in our lives. We can fight it, try to ignore it, or learn to deal with it effectively. I'd like to offer some ideas for dealing with conflict in recreation, and making your life easier, while saving our favorite forms of recreation.

Conflict is unavoidable at some point in your busy life. Whenever we share opinions or ideas, conflict is bound to surface. People just plain disagree on many things, especially when it comes to something we are passionate about. If your opinion is different than mine, then we might just be in conflict.

Conflict is a part of recreation, just like it is life and relationships. I am going to suggest ways to embrace it and make it useful. Conflict is not bad; it just is. It's how you react to it that gives it a flavor of good or bad.

As you read these tips, remember that much of what I suggest here has to do with you having the power to choose how you react to things, and not allowing someone to dictate your happiness or peace of mind.

"Choose" and "allow" are two of the most powerful words in the dictionary. For example, you might hear me say, *I choose not to get caught up in your garbage. And I am not going to allow you to ruin my day.* Unfortunately, the policeman I tried this on didn't think it was funny! (just kidding). But you have the choice as to how you react to something in your life.

Conflict can be viewed as powerful. It means people are sharing ideas and opinions that don't agree. It means new doors are being opened and new opportunities are being presented. It also might mean a few sleepless nights for you if you don't take some steps to harness the power of conflict.

Now I'm not suggesting that all conflict is "good." Conflict can twist up our guts, cut into our sleep; and make our face turn pretty darn red from frustration. But that is not what any of us want. Let me share with you some tips for dealing with conflict and turning it into something useful.

First, accept the fact that when people share opinions, there's bound to be differences (conflict). Heck, there's no way we could all think alike or we'd still be carrying clubs and living in caves. Recognize that conflict is natural and use it as a learning experience.

Second, try to stay objective and clearly express your expectations (or ideas). Clear communication is essential to avoiding unnecessary conflict. There's no use getting your knickers in an uproar over something you really didn't mean. So make sure what your listener is hearing is what you meant to say.

Third, never lose sight of your objective and try to maintain the "high ground" as they say in the military (and politics). During political conflict (meetings, hearings, conventions, etc.), take notes like an attorney. Get your key points jotted down for your "come back" and stick with them. Make your points over and over again if needed, until the listener clearly hears your ideas (or rebuttals).

Further, don't get caught up in emotions. When you feel like you're about to explode, back off, take a breath, and tackle the conflict head on, but with as much objectivity as you can muster. Break out your notes (like the attorney busily jotting things down during a court proceeding), and review your key points.

Fourth, look for the root of the problem (conflict). If it's purely a political agenda with no real foundation other than making a show, well, then you may have to accept the fact that all the logic in the world won't sway that. In this case, the conflict is phony and attention-gathering. Call it for what it is.

Fifth, assuming the conflict is real, try to agree to some ground rules during the conflict resolution process. For example, if two people who know each other are arguing, it might be good to agree that both will avoid each other's well-known "hot buttons" that merely escalate the emotional intensity of the argument. Agree to that up front. Agree to a fair fight, if you will.

Sixth, trust your instincts and the instincts of people you respect. If your instincts tell you to hang in the fight (conflict), then hang! If that little voice in your head says, "if I give up now, then I will lose much more in the long run," then don't give up.

In recreation, there is that reality, just like in politics, when nothing makes sense and there is no real answer because there is no real question. That's when we need to stay very focused and tuned into your message (bullet points, 5x7 cards, notes, etc.). Don't spend time wondering why someone would dress up like a coyote and wander down the dusty streets of some Texas cow town in front of the Longhorn Saloon on Saturday night!

I've heard many access advocates tell me that you just can't argue with emotional political scene-making. I think they're right. So we learn to argue the facts, stay with our bullet points, label the scene-making for what it is, and keep the high ground.

In the leadership training I offer, I really emphasize the idea of keeping notes and having your message on 5x7 cards or whatever works for you. Public speaking and dealing with conflict both benefit from having our key points right in front of us. If you find yourself at a loss for words, then you simply refer back to your key points (notes, expectations, and ideas). It works!

Lastly, I will admit that there are times when your attempts at conflict resolution may not work, and you may have to accept the fact that the other person is not in the same game you are. In that case, you may have to step back and change your tactics. Again, I suggest you trust your instincts and advisors (friends). You may have to resort to scene-making or emotions, not that I suggest that. But if you do change your tactics in order to make a point, make your plan first -- be clear as to your objectives. Brainstorm the consequences. Then if it's the right thing to do, proceed with gusto!

If you get to this point of succumbing to tactics you don't ordinarily like, then realize that you have changed the game and the ground rules. You may also have given up some of your high ground. I'm reminded of what my Mom used to tell me, "Just because Johnny does it, doesn't mean you get to do it." Oh, by the way, in those days, Johnny was sticking his head in a bag of airplane glue, and I'm sure glad I listened to my mother. :)

If you can recognize conflict for what it's worth, and learn to harness the power of conflict, you will find many new doors open to you. Opportunities will surface that you may have not seen before. And hopefully, by employing the tips I've presented here, you'll not lose any more sleep.

Del Albright, internationally published columnist, full time BlueRibbon Coalition Ambassador, and State Environmental Affairs Coordinator for CA4WDC, has authored volumes over the last 20 years on land use, outdoor recreation, and access. Contact BRC at 800.258.3742 or www.sharetrails.org; or visit Del's Web Site at www.delalbright.com/.