Contribution Theory – a Conflict Resolution Tool
by Sally Johnson, Mediation Services

A key to resolving disagreements with others, the “contribution” theory was introduced most helpfully in the 1999 book, *Difficult Conversations*. It’s an important way to prepare for a difficult conversation.

*Skeptical Reader*: *What, to settle an argument, I should donate to the other person’s favorite cause?*

Well, no. In a nutshell, contribution theory is the skill of recognizing your own role in the disagreement.

*Skeptical Reader*: *Uh-huh. Heard this before. When I was 6. From Mom. "Takes two to tango." Oh, please.*

That’s a little closer. Moms aren’t always wrong. But let’s change the context to you as an adult.

**Situation:** Picture yourself irritated right up to the eyeballs with a colleague in another department who won’t even return your phone calls, causing you to be unable to finish your work. Before you decide to call that guy’s boss to complain, we’re suggesting you should stop and think what you may have done – or not done – that could be part of this situation developing.

**SR:** *Yeah, right. I see where you’re going with this. It’s all my fault because I get irritated over the phone, or because I didn’t leave my phone number, or something. But hey! No way! I’m sweetness and light and very professional on the phone. Sometimes the other guy really is wrong. I might not have “contributed” at all.*

Good start. Sometimes the contribution really is obvious – like remembering that you might have chewed this person out in the past. But most of the time, it’s not so obvious. Here are a few possibilities:

- Maybe this has happened many times before, and you never made a fuss, so the other person really doesn’t know it’s a problem.
- Maybe there’s something going on in the other person’s life that you don’t know about – they’re sick, or they’re buried under a major project – and your only contribution is that you didn’t bother to find that out.
- Maybe whatever you called them about landed on their very last nerve. Your contribution here hasn’t happened yet. But if you call them back, all irritated, BEFORE you figure out what’s wrong – well, you’re off to the races.
- Maybe there is something you do that makes you hard to talk to, that you don’t realize.
SR: *No way! Like I said, I’m all sweetness and light, and besides, aren’t we all supposed to tolerate each other’s differences?*

Well, look at a couple of examples:

- Take facial expressions. Do you frown when you’re concentrating? Did you know that can scare off some people?
- Or what about the speed with which you speak? Is it so rapid-fire that people can’t follow you or ask questions?

We all have some ingrained mannerisms that we don’t even notice, but that others see clearly. Like the poet said,

```
My face? I don’t mind it
Because I’m behind it.
It’s the folks out in front that I jar.
```

Have you ever wondered how you might be jarring people?

Besides, I’m not saying that it’s usually about you. It’s usually about what’s going on for the other person.

SR: *And I’m supposed to read their mind?*

Nope. Something much easier. Just ask. Here’s a recommended formula:

You say: “I’m concerned because you (don’t return my phone calls.) Can you let me know – is there some problem I should know about?”

Then you listen.

SR: *And poof! All is friendship and harmony.*

No. But, 99 times out of 100, you’ll hear something you didn’t realize. And if you are willing to let that stand at face value, representing where that other person’s coming from, you are more than halfway to resolving the problem.