

Common ground easily slips from view in conflict situations. Positions become exaggerated as each person aims to persuade or undermine. Not surprisingly, people will overlook areas of common interest, missing the opportunity to acknowledge, learn from and build upon what they already have in common.

### Building Common Ground

Agreeing with a person that you are in disagreement with may feel like you're losing ground. However in one study, effective negotiators were found to point out areas of agreement three times more often than ineffective negotiators. Common ground is important to conflict resolution because it is so often ignored or not given much attention. If no one looks for common ground how will it be built?

Recall a conflict situation in your own life where you and the other person wanted to sort things out, yet things just worsened. On reflection where was the common ground between the two of you?

### Types of Common Ground

Even in the most difficult conflict situation you can assume a variety of common ground factors simply based on our shared humanity. A basic common ground is that both people appreciate being understood and want a resolution. It's also likely that each person will share the difficulty of not finding it easy to convey their true message. There is a shared sensitivity to stress and emotional pressure, even though it will be experienced differently. Despite the tensions that can emerge in conflict, there is usually the common factor of not aiming to hurt another person.

### Tips for building common ground

**Listen to and acknowledge the other view** - you can also thank a person for hearing you out. Remember that even when you disagree, achieving understanding is an important starting point.

**Personalise a discussion by expressing when the discussion is not easy** and that you do want the discussion to go well in spite of the stress.



**Pay attention to and acknowledge steps of progress in a discussion** - small and large. Refer back to areas of agreement as you negotiate other issues.

**Identify common goals.** When you turn your attention to the issues under discussion it is often easy to find that there are objectives that are in common although there are differences as to how to achieve the objectives.

### Lessons from Common Ground

A common ground perspective challenges us to go beyond a desire to “prove our point”; “be right” or judge another harshly. Common ground helps to build understanding and acceptance of a difficult situation. It guides us to focus on our own behaviour in addition to the behaviour of others.

When you keep common ground in mind it can become a helpful reference point to come back to if your negotiations reach an impasse. Common ground is also a foundation to be expanded upon so that the areas of agreement become progressively larger.

People tend to respond to situations in the same way – until the pattern is broken. It is enough for one person to start highlighting common ground, then your negotiating partner will be more willing to do the same.

You will still disagree and that's ok – the key is that common ground offers an antidote to patterns that trench conflict and create distance.