What do your fighting friends have in common? You.

The finer points of being caught in the middle, without becoming part of the problem

BY HEIDI STEVENS | Tribune Newspapers

That old axiom about three being a crowd is never truer than when two out of three are fighting.

Playing the neutral third party while your friends engage in all-out battle is exhausting and precarious. Handle it right and everyone’s happy. Handle it wrong and all three of you could end up parting ways.

We checked in with conflict resolution experts for tips on wrapping things up as quickly and delicately as possible.

“What you want to do is help both of them do their own best thinking about the situation rather than trying to fix it for them,” says former corporate litigator Caroline Packard, co-author of “The Mediator’s Handbook” (New Society Publishers). “You can listen and ask open-ended questions and help them think through what’s important to them.”

This is easier to do if you approach the situation with some internal guidelines about what you will and won’t do.

“I’ve been involved in a lot of these situations, and I’ve gotten myself into positions I didn’t intend to be in,” says corporate coach Joseph Grenny. “Now I try to approach the situations proactively so I keep myself out of the ditch in the future.”

Grenny, co-author of the highly acclaimed series of books focusing on intense communication, including “Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High” and “Crucial Accountability: Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments and Bad Behavior” (McGraw-Hill), says it’s critical to create a role for yourself that doesn’t fuel the feud and leave you feeling compromised.

Conflict mediator is not a role that comes naturally to many of us.

“We’re afraid of conflict and the strong emotions that go with it,” says Marla Stritzel-Sloan, a mediation coach who co-created Mediator in a Box, a board game aimed at resolving conflicts. “We’re afraid because we don’t have the skills to deal with conflict
“What you want to do is help both of them do their own best thinking about the situation rather than trying to fix it for them.”
— Caroline Packard, co-author of “The Mediator’s Handbook”

and our culture has taught us to sweep it under the rug.
“If it were commonplace to bring up an issue as soon as we noticed it,” she says, “and we had the skills to discuss it, it would clear the air quickly. Small issues would never become big issues.”

If only. Thankfully, conflict resolution can be learned.
“You can get better at it,” Packard says. “But it’s like playing the trombone. You have to be prepared to feel clumsy and fake at first.”

Three tips for getting past the clunky and reaching a resolution all parties can live with:

Set boundaries. “It’s important to have a very clear boundaries conversation up front with anybody who tries to get you in the middle of a conflict,” says Grenny. “If you don’t, you end up in a role you didn’t choose where you feel responsible or blamed or feeling like you compromised your integrity.”

He recommends emphasizing the importance of transparency. He suggests you might say, “I don’t want to hear anything that will affect my behavior toward the other person that either you or I won’t disclose” or “Don’t put something in my brain that’s going to make me feel or think differently about the other person, unless one of the two of us is going to take the responsibility to get it out in the open.”

Refuse to be a go-between, Packard adds. “Do not carry messages back and forth,” she says. “You risk being a target. If your friend says, ‘Can you talk to her?’ you’re better off saying, ‘Tell me a little bit more about what you’re feeling, and let me help you figure out a way to tell her.’”

And make sure your friends both know that your skillful listening is not the same as tacit approval or taking sides, Grenny says.

“Don’t mistake my love and support for you with agreement with your views or actions,” he suggests saying. “I’m not going to choose sides. I’m going to love you and I’m going to help them and if you’re going to hold this relationship hostage you probably ought not to talk to me.”

Know your place. You can be a sounding board or you can be a coach. Let your friends tell you what they need. Grenny recommends an opener like this:

“There are two reasons you and I can talk and I just want to know which of these you want, and you can change your mind at any point: The first is for me to validate you, where we focus on how you’re feeling — you’re feeling manipulated or hurt. The second is for you to get coaching. You’re confused and not sure how to respond. Do you want validation or do you want coaching?”

In either role, he says, clarify your boundaries.

“I won’t collude,” he says. “I won’t support your unhealthy responses or support your victim or villain story. I won’t sit idly by while you create pain for yourself, or support you in behavior that’s not good for you and not good for anybody else.”

If you’re coaching, help your friends narrow the issue down to its most solvable point.

“It’s hard to solve, ‘He’s a jerk,’” says Packard. “Tell your friend, ‘Give me an example of something he does.’ He’s a slob. He leaves his wet towels on the floor. Something you can talk about and help the person figure out how to bring up with the other person.”

Learn to defuse. There will be times and fights, of course, that even the most skilled mediator can’t bring to a peaceful resolution. In those cases, your only goal is to not escalate the situation.

“In the moment, when someone is extremely angry, it can be hard to think of a way to be tactful but clear,” Packard says. “The best thing you can do is help them get clear about what to do next.”

Sometimes it’s as simple as, “This is a really tough situation. What do you think your next step is? What’s most important to you in this situation?”

“The person in the middle has to put their own oxygen mask on first,” she says. “If you’re dealing with all the stress coming off of them, you’re putting yourself at risk and limiting your own thinking and it’s going to be harder for them to hear anything you say. You have to be able to give yourself a break.”

And remember that the friendships — yours and the one your friends share — may even become deeper for having endured a spat.

“Every relationship will have conflict,” says Stritzel-Sloan. “Whether a relationship becomes stronger will depend on how well you understand your own needs and wants and how well you communicate that to another. A real friend will receive that information with love and caring. That is intimacy. We have a deep need to be understood. Conflict offers us that opportunity.”

hstevens@tribune.com
Twitter @heidistevens13

DIY mediation kit

Still at a loss? You could hand your friends Mediator in a Box, a kit created by two sisters — Clare Stritzel-Sprowell, a family law mediator, and Marla Stritzel-Sloan, a mediation coach — that provides conversation cards, ground rules and a game board intended to help people resolve seemingly insurmountable conflicts.

“People get stuck in conflict because they haven’t gotten underneath the issue to what they really care about: their wants, concerns and needs,” says Stritzel-Sprowell. “You identify the problem. You clarify what is important to you and communicate that to each other. You ask open-ended questions. The process helps you hear what the other person is saying, and be heard.”

The following pointers are spelled out in the box. (Now if you can just get your friends on board.)

■ Set the rules. “There are two ground rules: Respect each other. Listen without interrupting.”

 ■ Know the goal. “Sometimes it’s not clear what the real problem is. It can be hidden in superficial details or you may be trying to solve two or three problems at once. Try to narrow it down: ‘What’s most important here?’ ‘What we need to solve is ...’ ‘We need to decide ...’ ‘Let’s find a way to ...’ ”

 ■ Speak the same language. “The better you become at deciphering the meaning behind the words, the better you will understand another’s perspective, and the easier it will be to reach a solution together. Check out what you think you hear by asking: ‘When you say ... I understand that to mean ... Is that accurate?’ ”

 ■ Discuss solutions. “Are there solutions that the two of you can agree on? Discuss how you would implement them.”

 ■ Stick to your solution. “Write down the details of the solution(s) you’ve agreed to try. Who will do what, when, where and how? Set a date to check in with each other to evaluate how your solution is working.”

Mediator in a Box costs $64, including shipping: simplehelpinabox.com.

— H.S.