

Managing Conflict

READY TO PUT INTO ACTION IN 4m

*Conflict does not need to be the **end of the world**
- it can be the start of a useful learning process*

Unresolved workplace conflict can lead to bad things. Motivation and success can be damaged when colleagues start to generally dislike, or specifically disagree, with each other. In the very worst cases, conflict can even cause health or legal issues. Conflict can occur at, and between, all levels of the company.



CAUSES

There will be small causes of conflict that are different in every business environment and situation, but the main causes are often similar. These include:

- Unclear communications
- Weak management
- Lack of equal opportunities
- Unclear job roles
- Not enough training
- Unfair treatment
- Bad work environment
- Bullying and harassment

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

It is much better to recognize and resolve possible conflict as early as possible, rather than waiting for disputes and disagreements to develop. Watch out for conflict that is hidden below the surface, and address it as soon as you notice it.

Conflict can be caused by something that is not said, as much as something that is said. Some people deal with things by hiding their feelings, and will do their best to stay away from conflict. Groups (formal and informal) often try to resist pressure by distancing themselves from the rest of the company.

It may not be a single problem or event that makes you aware of a conflict; it could be a changing pattern including some, or all, of the following signs and symptoms:

1. **Motivation drops**
 - a. Colleagues stop volunteering for new tasks.
 - b. Employees lower their input at team meetings.
2. **Behaviours change**
 - a. Social events become less common and regular.
 - b. Colleagues become less friendly towards each other.
3. **Productivity falls**
 - a. The number of queries and complaints increase as teamwork decreases.
 - b. People take more sick days and time off, due to stress and bad feelings.

STEP 1: STOP REACTING

If we want to develop the self-control we need for effectively resolving conflict, we first have to focus on understanding our natural reactions to conflict, or the threat of conflict. When an animal is under attack, it has three options: to fight, take flight, or to freeze. But:

- You can't fight, because shouting or getting angry will increase any bad feeling.
- You must avoid flight, because running from a problem won't make it go away.
- You must not freeze, because being indecisive, uncertain, or passive, will not stop the issue.

You are not an animal. You must face your problems in a calm and rational way, and develop a plan after considering various views and perspectives.

STEP 2: START THINKING

You need to understand the situation in a neutral, balanced way. Stop assuming. Stop guessing. What is really going on? How and when is it happening? Who is involved and what are they doing? What has caused the conflict? What are its wider effects and consequences?

You should clearly express the negative effects of continuing conflict, so that those involved can see the situation from a different perspective. It will also help each side to trust you.

STEP 3: START TALKING

Many conflicts can be resolved by informally clearing the air. People are often angry when they do not understand the other side of an argument – as the old saying goes: “an enemy is one whose story we have not heard.”

Make time to talk. You are more likely to find a solution in a quiet time and place than in quick conversations between tasks. Start to calm the situation by asking each person to explain what they think. Just be sure that your inquiry is phrased like an inquiry, not an accusation.

It takes two to tango. Everyone involved can admit what they have done wrong without accepting all of the blame. This will help create feelings of friendliness and fairness. Saying something positive about the opposing side will not hurt either.

“It is better to speak like a giraffe (which walks tall and has the biggest heart) than a jackal (which speaks low and mean).” Giraffe Language is another name for Non-violent Communication, the popular conflict resolution concept developed in the 1960's by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. It focuses on three parts of communication:

- Self-empathy (understanding yourself)
- Empathy (understanding others)
- Honest self-expression (authentic expression likely to inspire compassion in others)

STEP 4: START ACTING

If you decide on an objective outcome, a desired result, it will be easier to resolve the conflict, because everyone will know what to aim for.

Have everyone identify SMARTER (Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Time-bound, Ethical and Recorded, see Prompt on this) actions that can be used right away. These should improve communication, creating more effective dialogue and debate.

In the longer term, you may want to form (or reform) working groups and staff councils. These structures give everyone a voice, a feeling of participation, and a sense of responsibility. They will feel like part of the solution, not just the problem.

STEP 5: SEEK OUTSIDE HELP WHEN NECESSARY

It may be necessary to seek outside professional help to resolve some conflicts. These professionals have formal training and a lot of experience in managing disputes and disagreements.

They will not usually push people in a particular direction; instead, they will help them to find their own solutions. Be careful when deciding who to work with in this way, because the wrong person, with the wrong approach, can do more harm than good.

Knowledge and understanding are needed to avoid, reduce, and resolve conflict, but some battles may be beyond your area of expertise. Get specialist advice, especially when legal matters are involved.

CONCLUSION

You can't avoid all conflicts at work. They are part of the creative process, of new ideas, and of change. Conflict does not need to be the end of the world – it can be the start of a useful learning process.