

Personal Development Resources

Quick Guide to Resolving Workplace Conflict

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Where there are people, there is conflict. We all bring our different values, needs and idiosyncrasies to the workplace – and they can sometimes clash with those of our colleagues.

Left unchecked, conflict brews and can lead to animosity. Teamwork can break down, morale drops, and tasks grind to a halt. Organisations feel the hit, too, with wasted talent, high absenteeism, and increased staff turnover.

But conflict can be resolved. What's more, it can be healthy – bringing issues to light, strengthening relationships, and sparking innovation. In this Quick Guide, we'll explore different types of conflict, what causes them, and ways to reach a positive outcome.



Types of Workplace Conflict

Generally, workplace conflicts fall into two camps:

- **Personality conflict** or disagreements between individuals. These clashes are driven and perpetuated by emotions such as anger, stress and frustration. A study found that “personality clashes and warring egos” account for nearly half of all workplace conflicts.
- **Substantive conflict** is tangible and task-related, like the decisions leaders make, the performance of a team member, or your company's direction.

If unaddressed, both can spiral into wider conflict between teams, departments or businesses.



What Causes Conflict at Work?

Some of the most common causes of workplace conflict are:

- **Unclear responsibilities.** Some team members may feel they do more work than others or resent those who seem to have fewer responsibilities. Blame and frustration can build due to duplicated work or unfinished tasks.
- **Competition for resources.** Time, money, materials, equipment and skillsets are finite resources. Competition for them can lead to conflict.
- **Different interests.** People may focus on personal over organisational goals. Or be held up and frustrated by others who they rely on to do their jobs effectively.



Conflict Resolution Skills

When you find yourself in a conflict situation, these five approaches will help you to resolve disagreements quickly and effectively.

1. Raise the Issue Early

Address the person (or people) concerned. Keeping quiet only lets resentment fester and speaking with other people first can fuel rumour and misunderstanding. So, whether you're battling over the thermostat or feel that you're being micromanaged, be direct and talk with the other party.

Be assertive (but non-aggressive) and speak openly. This will encourage others to do the same – and you can get to the root cause of a problem before it escalates. If you're not comfortable approaching the other party, or worry that it may exacerbate the problem, speak with your manager first.

2. Manage Your Emotions

Choose your timing when you talk to someone about the conflict. If you're angry, you may say something you'll regret and make the situation worse.

So, stay calm, collect yourself, and ask, “What is it I want to achieve here?”, “What are the issues I'm having?” and “What is it that I would like to see?”



Conflict Resolution Skills continued

3. Show Empathy

When you talk to someone about a conflict, it's natural to want to state your own case – rather than hear out the other side. But when two people do this, the conversation goes in circles.

Instead, invite the other party to describe their position, ask how they think they might resolve the issue, and listen with empathy.

Putting yourself in the other person's shoes is an essential part of a win win negotiation. This helps you to build mutual respect and understanding – and achieve an outcome that satisfies both parties.

4. Practice Active Listening

To identify the source of the conflict you have to really listen. To listen actively:

- Paraphrase the other party's points to show you're listening and really understand them.
- Look out for non-verbal signals that contradict what they are saying, e.g. a hesitant tone behind positive words. Bring these out into the open to address them together.
- Use body language, such as nodding your head, to show interest and make it clear that you're following them.

5. Acknowledge Criticism

Some of the things the other person tells you may be difficult to hear. But remember that criticism or constructive feedback is about job behaviours and not you as a person.

So, keep an open mind and use criticism to help you to identify areas to improve, perform better next time, and grow.

Key Points

Conflict is common in the workplace. The biggest mistake you can make is to do nothing. Unresolved tensions can affect the health and performance of people and organisations.

So, use our conflict resolution skills to pre-empt, manage and fix conflicts. You may discover positives, too, such as improving processes, strengthening relationships, and innovating.