

Managing Conflict in the Workplace

As a supervisor or manager, being able to manage conflict in a constructive way is a critical skill. Most of us don't like dealing with conflict and feel ill equipped to manage it in the workplace. However, there are many tools and techniques you can use that will provide you with the background and tools you need to be more confident and more effective in dealing with conflict.

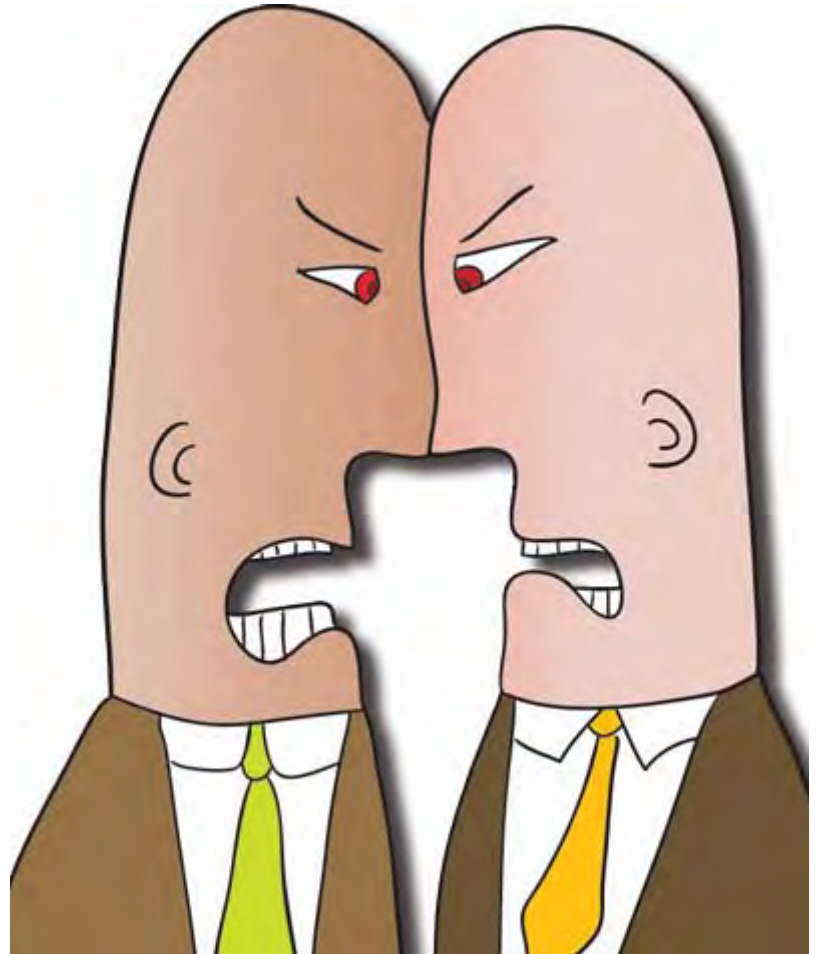
In basic definition, conflict is a state of disagreement or opposition between two or more persons regarding ideas, interests, needs, values, desires or wishes. Some conflicts are pretty minor in nature and are easy to work out while others may require some degree of intervention.

Conflict is natural and inevitable. It's part of our daily lives, like it or not. Having the skill set to manage conflict is key to maintaining employee morale and having a productive work environment. Unmanaged conflicts can be detrimental by creating negative impacts.

Negative Impacts of Conflict in the Workplace

- ▲ Lost production – as employees spend more of their time and energy on the conflict at the expense of production.
- ▲ Can lead to poor decisions being made just to end the conflict.
- ▲ Stress and burnout.
- ▲ Turnover, key people quit.
- ▲ Stress related physical ailments.
- ▲ Stress related emotional ailments.
- ▲ Attendance problems.
- ▲ Family problems.

As a supervisor, you need to have a thick skin at times. Not only are you expected to be able to deal with your own personal workplace conflicts, you also need to be able to help others who are in conflict. One piece of advice is to not take it too personally. The acronym QTIP means "quit taking it personally." As hard as it is sometimes, we need to keep our perspective. Conflicts usually arise out of genuine differences of opinion. Unfortunately, many of our co-workers have poor conflict management skills so their attempts to deal with conflicts may come across as personal attacks.



Try not to take it personally and always take the high road. Use your conflict resolution skills to not only resolve the issue, but to preserve the relationship as well.

Take charge as a last option. If your attempts to resolve a conflict within your team have failed and the conflict is still raging, it's time to take charge. Don't allow conflicts to escalate to the point where there is physical or emotional risk to people. You also need to stay mindful of the business impacts of the conflict.

It should be cause for concern when employees refuse to move forward and resolve a conflict. At some point the conflict becomes more important than actual work and allowing this type of behavior to persist sets a bad precedent. There will be times when you have to step in and take charge, but don't get caught in the trap of settling every petty dispute.

Seven Steps to Resolve Conflict

If you see a conflict developing in your team and it's clear you need to act, here's a process you can follow to increase your chances of a successful outcome.

STEP 1 Promptly let people know that you're aware of the conflict and you're concerned about how the conflict is affecting their performance and the team's performance.

STEP 2 Set up a joint problem solving session. This seems like a simple step but a number of positive things happen when you set up this forum and frame it this way. You've identified that there is a conflict and you've put everyone on notice that we're going to meet and resolve this conflict. You haven't cast blame or taken sides. You put the focus on the problem and not on the players.

STEP 3 Have participants present their viewpoints as objectively as they can. Participants often struggle with this step and have difficulties verbalizing their viewpoints on the conflict. Be patient and help them identify what it is that's causing the conflict. Keep the participants focused on identifying and solving the problem. Stop them immediately if they start to argue or personally attack each other. It may be helpful to focus their attention on you as the facilitator or on a whiteboard where you record their viewpoints.

STEP 4 Seek agreement on the actual problem that needs to be solved.

STEP 5 Once the problem that is causing the conflict has been identified, it's time to start generating possible solutions. Call on each participant to identify their possible solutions. Don't allow others to criticize or attack their ideas, simply clarify them and record them on a whiteboard.

STEP 6 With all the data on the table, sometimes the solutions are obvious. If so, get commitment on what each person will do going forward to resolve the conflict. If the best solutions are not obvious, it may take some filtering and testing of ideas to come up with a workable solution. Go back to the original problem statements and test each solution against the desired outcomes. Develop some criteria to filter down to the best solutions and press for each person's commitment to follow up on their part to resolve the conflict.

STEP 7 Summarize the meeting including the problem statement, solutions and commitments. Set a follow-up date to make sure the conflict gets resolved.

Managing conflicts can be challenging for those who may be conflict avoidant themselves. Facilitating a conflict

resolution meeting does require a supervisor to be assertive and in control. Techniques to maintain control of this meeting include framing the meeting as a joint problem solving session, not taking sides and focusing their attention on you and the white board versus each other. Don't be afraid to be assertive and expect that you may need to raise your voice at times to stop arguments and refocus the meeting.

Managing Your Anger

In addition to assisting your staff with resolving conflict, it's also important to keep your own frustrations in check. Sometimes your staff will make you angry with their inability to work through issues or get along. Also, it's easy to become angry when you have a direct conflict with one of your staff. Here are a few time tested tips for managing your own emotions when dealing with conflict.

- ▲ Call time out - If the session becomes heated and tempers are rising, call a time out. Take a few minutes to let everyone cool off and reconvene when you're ready.
- ▲ Count to ten – Take time before speaking if you're ready to blurt out something that you'll regret later.
- ▲ Take a walk - Take a walk to blow off some steam.
- ▲ Breathe deeply - Try deep breathing as a relaxation technique.
- ▲ Choose time and place - Choose a location that you're comfortable with. Consider a larger room on neutral turf, with a whiteboard.
- ▲ Get centered - This means to compose yourself and push out other thoughts and interruptions so you can focus fully on the task at hand.
- ▲ Pick the right time - Choose a time of day that your stress level would naturally be lower.
- ▲ Prepare ahead of time - Draft some notes to help stay on track. Confer with another trusted peer or an HR professional beforehand. If conflict resolution is new to you, consider having someone coach you through the process beforehand.

