



How to Manage Workplace Conflict

Understand Where Conflict Begins

Conflict occurs when the needs and desires of two or more parties are incompatible. When those parties strive for the same thing — whether it is money, materials, space, time or any other resource — they are in conflict. The roots of conflict are discussed by Howard M. Guttman in *When Goliaths Clash*.

In business, people with different cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs and psychological and emotional needs are forced to work together for eight or more hours a day, year after year, to achieve a set of objectives. It is inconceivable that all parties will consistently agree on all matters.

Business conflict can be found throughout organizations regardless of function or level in the corporate hierarchy. As a consequence, executives must be adept at managing conflict throughout their organizations.

There are two main sources of conflict among people in both personal and business relationships: individual differences and stylistic clashes.

Individual differences. When we interact with people whose wants, needs, values, beliefs, assumptions and interpretations differ from our own, we might find ourselves in conflict with them. But that does not mean we have to butt heads with them. People can have different opinions without taking those differences personally. One of the keys to successfully managing conflict is learning to depersonalize it, or to simply view it as a business situation to be handled.

Stylistic clashes. In a business context, style means the ways each individual approaches interpersonal communication. Effective

communication is critical for resolving differences, and each of us needs to be aware of how we communicate. What is our primary style? Do we use it some, all or most of the time? Do we vary our style depending on the situation, the person we are communicating with or the issue that is on the table? It is helpful to think about communication methods in three broad styles: nonassertive, assertive and aggressive.

The conditions under which we work can be a significant conflict producer. Hierarchical structure, policies and procedures, performance reviews, reward systems, organizational culture, and even physical plant conditions can turn the mildest-mannered employee into a raging bull.

Downsizing, rightsizing, restructuring, re-engineering and de-layering produce a constant churn that increases the potential for disagreement. Executives find themselves competing for resources, clarifying roles and procedures, setting standards, and establishing goals and priorities.

Manifest conflict is in-your-face disagreement. It occurs when executives square off at a committee meeting or when someone comes into your office complaining loudly about next year's budget.

Latent conflict is submerged disagreement. It occurs when people sit quietly through meetings plotting ways to sabotage their teammates when they walk out of the room. It exhibits itself indirectly, through lack of cooperation between departments or procrastination on project deadlines.

Strategic conflict — disagreement at the top over the future of direction of the organization

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— is conflict at its deadliest and is the hardest type of conflict to resolve.

Resolve Conflicts Constructively

The most effective solution to conflict is to take a rational, problem-centered approach, according to William A. Salmon and Rosemary T. Salmon, authors of *The Mid-Career Tune-Up*. Here's what they suggest:

The first step is to analyze the situation. Start by describing the conflict: Who is having the problem? What triggered the conflict? Is it getting worse?

Next, review the impact the conflict is having on the achievement of work goals. Is time being wasted working around the problem? Is the conflict leading to increased costs?

Identify any broader impact of the conflict. Is the conflict affecting the morale of the work group? Is the conflict affecting the level of service being provided to customers?

Finally, describe the benefits of resolving the conflict in terms of productivity, efficiency, time and cost savings, and any other relevant factors. Understanding the impact of the conflict will help you determine which approach should be adopted in resolving the conflict.

You have three options, or approaches, for resolving a conflict: assertive, cooperative, or collaborative.

The Assertive Approach. Decide that you have a problem that must be resolved. Schedule a face-to-face meeting with the person with whom you're having the conflict. To prepare you should:

1. *Determine the exact words you want to say to start the meeting.* The goal is to keep the conversation focused on the issue and its impact. Be sure to cover all the key points you want to make.
2. *Be prepared to use "I" statements to send a clear message that this is having an impact on you.* Example: "I'm sure there's an explanation for these missed deadlines, but I need to know how to prevent further delays."
3. *When you are ready to turn the conversation over to the next person, ask a nonthreatening question that invites participation.* Example: "How do you think we can resolve this issue?"

Not everybody will appreciate such a straight-on approach. But you will establish a reputation as someone who confronts important issues honestly and directly.

The Cooperative Approach. The second option is to passively accept the situation.

One reason to do this may be that the issue is not sufficiently important to you to dedicate time and effort toward a resolution. Or you may decide that this is not a battle that you want to fight at this time.

State your position and ensure that the other person agrees with your assessment. Example: "I know that you and I need to reach an agreement on how to handle this backlog of requisitions, but it's not a real priority for me right now. Do you mind if we put it off for a few weeks?"

The Collaborative Approach. In this option, the problem needs to be addressed, but you use a combination of the assertive and cooperative approaches. Be firm about certain issues involved, but willing to compromise on others.

Your response to conflict among employees and between employees and management should differ.

The Manager's Role in Resolving Conflict

Kirk Blackard and James W. Gibson examine conflict management in *Capitalizing on Conflict* and answer the question "When should management intervene?"

Although not all conflict needs to be brought to the surface, much should. Often, what is required is that management needs to provide a safe opportunity to talk about concerns. This can include maintaining frequent contact with subordinates, having an open-door policy and managing by walking around.

Once conflict has surfaced, you as a manager must make a decision. Your response to conflict among employees and between employees and management should differ.

In employee-employee conflict, neither the company nor its management is involved. Instead, the conflict is between co-workers or workers who aren't in a supervisory relationship. The conflict may be personal or work-related. Before you intervene as a manager, you must weigh the costs and risks. Employees often do better if they

How to Get a Relationship Back on Track

When others refuse to speak their minds or they communicate in a way that is abusive and insulting, you can't force them into dialogue, but you can take steps to make it safer for them to do so.

The authors of *Crucial Conversations* advise that restoring safety is your greatest hope to get the relationship back on track. In the chapter "Explore Others' Paths," they suggest using these powerful listening skills:

Ask. Start by simply expressing interest in the other person's views.

Mirror. Increase safety by respectfully acknowledging the emotions people appear to be feeling.

Paraphrase. As others begin to share part of their story, restate what you've heard to show not just that you understand, but also that it's safe for them to share what they're thinking.

Prime. If others continue to hold back, prime. Take your best guess at what they may be thinking and feeling.

And as you begin to share your views, remember the ABCs:

Agree. Agree when you do.

Build. If others leave something out, agree where you do, then build.

Compare. When you do differ significantly, don't suggest others are wrong. Compare your two views.

Test Your Conflict Management IQ



Howard Guttman asks in *When Goliaths Clash*, how effectively does your organization manage conflict? The more questions below to which you answer “yes,” the greater your company’s need to examine its conflict-management procedures:

- ✓ Is your business strategy fuzzy or unclear? Does your senior management team often debate its meaning?
- ✓ Do people in your company arrive late for meetings or not at all?
- ✓ Do meetings often deteriorate into chaos?
- ✓ Do you have more meetings than you should, because closure is never reached?
- ✓ Does the atmosphere become tense when a certain executive enters the room or a particular issue is raised?
- ✓ Are priorities constantly changing? Are people unclear about who owns issues?
- ✓ Are discussion and debate discouraged? Is silent agreement the norm?

solve their own problems, and intervention takes time and money. You should stay out of most purely personal conflicts, but you may need to intervene when the dispute is job-related.

If you as a manager do intervene, it is usually most effective to coach the parties on an appropriate solution rather than imposing one. Only after it becomes apparent that the parties cannot resolve the conflict should managers impose a solution.

If the conflict is between an employee and management, different rules apply. Its basis is in actions and positions taken by management against employees or by employees against management. Your role in this type of dispute is to represent the best interests

of the organization, and all its workers, regardless of whether its actions will perpetuate or escalate conflict in the short term.

For example, you may elect to fire a worker who keeps violating company policies, even if that will almost certainly escalate the conflict. Management’s role includes playing investigator, decision-maker, implementer and advocate for the company.

Adopt Techniques for Resolving Conflict

In *Executive Presence*, Harrison Monarth offers that managers and professionals striving to bolster their executive presence can and should adopt the following techniques

for resolving conflict — not so much to win as to navigate conflict situations toward outcomes that include strengthened relationships, a greater sense of teamwork and a mutual resolve to take the organization forward:

1. Use active listening. Hearing and understanding the logic and reasoning of both sides is critical to the creation of a mutually satisfying resolution.

2. Separate the positions from the issues. Begin with the issue and then view the positions in that context.

3. Understand and validate. As an arbitrating manager, it is critical that you not only seek to understand both positions in a conflict but also validate each party’s claim to what he or she believes is right.

4. Empathize. The power of empathy in conflict resolution cannot be overstated.

5. Implement boundaries and expectations. Because you are a manager, people are looking to you to clarify boundaries and expectations for behavior and outcomes.

6. Be tactful. If you remain sensitive to their feelings, they’ll remain open to your input.

7. Explore the issues and alternatives. If you can get them to talk about an alternative, you’re on the way to getting them to accept one.

8. Use “I” statements. If you say, “I was angry when you said that about me,” you’ll be greeted with more openness than if you said, “What you said about me was wrong.”

9. The power of stroking. If you can find something positive to say about the other person in the heat of a dispute, that person will be more open to hearing what you have to say about the issue at hand.

10. Attack the issues, not the person. As an arbitrating manager, listen for anything that is personal in nature and bring the conversation back to the issue as quickly as possible.

Conflict Should Be Managed, Not Eliminated

Whether conflict works for or against an organization, shores it up, or undermines its foundation, depends on one thing: how it is managed. The anatomy of conflict is dissected in *When Goliaths Clash*:

Conflict is destructive when it:

- Leads to a win/lose game where one side wins at the other’s expense.
- Diverts energy from important activities or issues.
- Destroys people’s morale.
- Polarizes groups and reduces cooperation.
- Deepens differences.
- Produces irresponsible/regrettable behavior (e.g., personal attacks).
- Leads to stalemates rather than decisions.

Conflict keeps a company alive and flourishing when it:

- Stimulates healthy interaction and involvement in accomplishing a task.
- Opens up issues of importance.
- Strengthens team spirit and generates commitment to group goals.
- Results in greater understanding.
- Helps to build cohesiveness.
- Helps individuals to grow.
- Results in better solutions to a problem.
- Improves the quality of a group’s work.

An HR Expert's Perspective on Conflict Resolution



In a recent *CKC Executive Insights* interview, host Andrew Clancy spoke with Jim Gulezian, director of human resources at Engineered Arresting Systems Corporation. Here is an excerpt from the interview related to an executive's role in conflict resolution:

AC: Conflict resolution is certainly a part of any HR professional's job, but before a problem lands at your doorstep, it's probably gone through management channels first. It's a vital skill for anyone looking to advance in an organization. How can executives improve their abilities in this area?

JG: Well I think No.1, first of all, it does take the courage and determination to bite the bullet. The problem with conflict resolution is the absence of effective conflict resolution. More often people will lose lots of sleep at night and the very next day, when there are opportunities where they can engage the other person or they can take some initiative in resolving a particular issue or problem, all of a sudden they back away from it, the day goes along, and they're going through the same scenario over and over again.

I think first and foremost, you always have to ask yourself, "Why am I angry?" "Why am I

upset?" and "What would be the purpose and the desired outcomes if I were to sit down and discuss this particular issue or concern with this person?" And if there is a constructive, purposeful reason for doing it, then it's important to understand the person you would be interacting with. What are the person's concerns? What are the potential hot, touchy points — the potential pitfalls — and things along those lines. And feeling prepared and comfortable in being able to constructively, objectively and in a firm manner, respond to any pushback that you're going to get during that discussion.

The other thing is, more often than not, people become overly optimistic in terms of the intended outcome. And what I mean by that is, sometimes you're not going to fix the whole issue in one discussion. Sometimes the person may become so upset and concerned with the feedback you are providing him or her with, that you need to take a step back and give the person some recovery time to be able to feel comfortable continuing that discussion.

So it takes a lot of patience, tolerance and willingness to hear what someone has to say, especially if it's not something you are particularly fond of receiving in the form of feedback.

Keep Your Emotions in Check

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler share valuable advice on how to talk about sensitive issues in *Crucial Conversations*.

The more important the discussion, the less likely we are to be on our best behavior. More specifically, we advocate or express our views quite poorly. There are skills that can help us state our opinions when we believe so strongly in something that we risk shutting others down rather than opening them up to our ideas.

The best at dialogue speak their minds completely and do it in a way that makes it safe for others to hear what they have to say and respond to it as well. They are totally frank and completely respectful.

In order to speak honestly when honesty could easily offend others, you have to find a way to maintain safety. Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler suggest you can speak the unspeakable and still maintain respect by carefully blending three ingredients: confidence, humility and skill.

Confidence. Have the confidence to say what needs to be said to the person who needs to hear it. Be confident that you can speak openly without brutalizing others or causing undue offense.

Humility. Be humble enough to realize you don't have a monopoly on the truth. Realize that others have valuable input.

Skill. Learn to share delicate information willingly in a way that people can be grateful for your honesty.

Hold on to your belief; merely soften your approach.

There are five tools presented in *Crucial Conversations* that can help you talk about even the most sensitive topics, identified as STATE your path:

Share your facts. Start with the least controversial, most persuasive elements of your path to action.

Tell your story. Explain what you're beginning to conclude.

Ask for others' paths. Encourage others to share both their facts and their stories.

Talk tentatively. State your story as a story — don't disguise it as a fact.

Encourage testing. Make it safe for others to express differing or even opposing views.

Catch yourself before you launch into a monologue. Realize that if you're starting to feel indignant or if you can't figure out why others don't buy in, you need to recognize that you're starting to enter dangerous territory. Back off your harsh and conclusive language, not your belief. Hold on to your belief; merely soften your approach.

About Business Conflict

Insight into workplace conflict is found in this quote from Dale Carnegie Training's *The 5 Essential People Skills*, in the chapter devoted to "Assertive Conflict Resolution":

"One of the hard things about business conflict is the fact that it quickly becomes totally un sentimental. When money and workplace issues are involved, it's amazing how quickly everything else burns away. All the lunches, the company retreats and the softball games mean nothing when the pedal meets the metal in a corporate setting.

"Ironically, this is something that makes business conflicts easier to handle than serious arguments between spouses, family members, or close friends. In those conflicts, there really are deep emotional issues that can make a clear resolution very difficult to come by. In business arguments, you may be shocked to realize how little personal feelings mean when push comes to shove." ♦