



Conflict Resolution Strategies

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The recipe for workplace conflict is decidedly simple: bring two or more people together and assign them a task. Unless the stars have aligned in your favor, there's going to be some cause for disagreement between them, and if conflict ensues, their ability to cooperate will suffer.

Regrettably, too often employers tolerate unresolved conflict because it isn't a legal matter with potential fines, they're busy with other things, they don't know how to manage it, or because doing so is sure to be uncomfortable. But unresolved conflict is one of the most dangerous threats to an organization because it prevents people from collaborating and working efficiently, and successful teamwork is essential to your bottom line. **Causes of Conflict**

Before we examine strategies for resolving conflict in the workplace, let's look at the common underlying causes of that conflict. Understanding how conflicts arise will help you determine which strategy to use.

- **Miscommunication:** Often a conflict between people is more perceived than real—a result of a misunderstanding or miscommunication. A speaker is unclear, or a listener takes a statement the wrong way. Offense or frustration is caused not because of a real disagreement, but because of a perception.
- **Incompatible positions or priorities:** Conflicts often arise because two or more individuals (or teams) can't all get what they want. Their ideas about what to do or how to do it can't all be done together. Maybe a deadline that one person requires can't be met without someone else having to rearrange their priorities, and maybe those priorities can't easily be rearranged.
- **Emotional manipulation:** Some people try to get what they want by manipulating the emotions of others. A regularly tardy employee might have a go-to sob story about their situation, which they use to garner sympathy. But once emotional manipulation is revealed for what it is, it breeds distrust, and people who distrust one another can't work well together.
- **Internal competition:** Competition can be healthy and good within an organization, but it can also incentivize people to play dirty, undermining or sabotaging the efforts of others. Like emotional manipulation, competition can create distrust. People stop collaborating, communicating, and sharing their work.
- **Poor performance:** In some cases, issues develop between people in the workplace because an individual or a team isn't getting their job done or doing it well. One person's poor performance can be like the first in a line of dominos, leading to a chain reaction that eventually topples the whole operation. Distrust, resentment, anger, and other negative emotions are the result, and these feelings most certainly find expression—to friends at work in the form of gossip and often the offending party as a public scolding.

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Solutions

- **Build a platform for collaboration:** Before people can resolve their differences, they often need to find an area of shared interest, so they have some common ground to build on. That might be an important project or quarterly earnings goal that can be used as a point of focus. If nothing else, help your employees see that everyone wants the organization to succeed in its mission. They may be



more willing to compromise or give alternative ideas a try if they know everyone is truly working for the same purpose.

- **Address behavioral and performance problems:** These issues should be addressed whether they're causing conflicts or not, but especially if they're creating office drama. Tolerating behavioral and performance problems, especially when they affect the work of your good performers, will only hasten your most talented employees out the door.
- **Teach people how to communicate clearly and effectively:** Communication is a skill, and not everyone is good at it. Being able to communicate well takes more than an understanding of grammar and syntax. It also takes empathy, candor, an ability to read people and anticipate how they might perceive and react to what's communicated. Perhaps most importantly, good communication skills require the ability to listen. If an employee doesn't have these skills, then you need to teach them (or find someone who can). Your employees will be much more adept at working through conflicts if they know how to communicate.
- **Practice conflict resolution techniques:** There's no better way to develop and maintain skills than to practice them. Set aside time at a company offsite or team meeting to role-play different conflicts; you can call this "working through scenarios" if you think your team will bristle at the thought of acting. These practice sessions will give your employees an opportunity to work creatively through impasses without stress and frustration—and without hindering their work. They can then apply these skills to the real-life conflicts that will inevitably arise.

In some cases, conflicting parties will not be able to resolve their differences, and no resolution will please them. That's life. You don't always get your way. And while you can't—and shouldn't—try to regulate people's feelings, you can and should set high standards for professional behavior. But part of setting and enforcing those high standards will involve managers and HR professionals stepping in, setting the scene for conflict resolution, and accepting that the resolution might not always be comfortable. It will, however, make the organization stronger.