

Managing Conflict

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you'll learn about ways to deal with conflict in the workplace, both organizational conflict where teams or groups are in conflict and interpersonal conflict that can happen between individuals.

In particular, you will learn about:

1. **Organizational Conflict**

2. **Interpersonal Conflict**

1. Organizational Conflict

When you hear the word “conflict,” you might think about people arguing and creating an unpleasant work environment. Maybe you’ve been embroiled in workplace conflict and dreaded even going to work. However, sometimes conflict can also be healthy. Healthy conflict comes from recognizing disagreement and differences as symptoms of a deeper organizational problem that can be addressed. For example, if conflict emerges because some team members feel they are doing more than their share of the work, it might lead to finding ways to balance the workload. If conflict emerges because some staff have concerns about a business plan, conflict can expose the weaknesses in the plan and help brainstorm solutions. These are all instances of **organizational conflict**, where the tension is due to the actual work, not to personal differences.

A degree of conflict is vital to group success in order to avoid groupthink and to generate more innovative ideas among members of the group, who should have diverse opinions and points of view. In addition, healthy conflict generates buy-in and offers elements of ownership and a sense of cooperation and enhanced membership to all of the group members. When members of a group feel safe expressing conflicting beliefs and opinions, groups are more productive and less prone to conformity. More importantly, unaddressed conflict can fester and grow until the entire work culture is toxic.



THINK ABOUT IT

When have you experienced productive conflict? Can you name a time that an argument resulted in solving the initial problem? How did that conflict begin and end?

Some of the signs of organizational conflict are:

- Small groups within the organization vent or gossip about other groups.
- Groups start to feel competitive with one another rather than collaborative.
- Meetings are unproductive, either because they have become contentious or because people refuse to participate.
- People within the organization don't trust one another.
- People within the organization focus on passing blame for a problem instead of solving the problem.

When conflict does occur, it is important to address it immediately by getting all parties communicating with one another respectfully. Although developing a solution to the conflict may take time, acknowledging it will help to ensure that it can become productive to the team. In most instances of team conflict, avoidance of conflict will deepen the divide. Fostering support, trust, and open communication is essential to turning the conflict into a productive outcome.

Open communication can be established by the following:

- **Point out the advantages of resolving the conflict.**
 - Most people don't enjoy conflict and the prospect of a more peaceful workplace will be a good incentive.
- **Create a goal of discovery rather than of one side "winning" or persuading the other they are right.**
 - Even before brainstorming solutions, participants should have opportunities to clear the air and understand one another, and seek the root cause of the conflict.
- **Establish ground rules.**
 - For example, participants should take turns when talking and not interrupt.
 - Each person should have an opportunity to share their perspective.
 - Tell participants to avoid all-or-none statements such as "always" and "never," and point out exceptions when these statements are used.
- **Practice (and encourage) active listening and empathy.**
 - Maintain a neutral vantage point and be willing to be persuaded.
 - Use clarifying statements to ensure the other party feels heard and understood.
 - Participants should recognize each other for having expressed their view and feelings.
 - All participants make a genuine effort to understand the perspectives of others.
- **A facilitator helps keep the meeting positive and productive.**
 - The facilitator can't have an obvious rooting interest in the conflict, such as being a member of a team in conflict with another team.
 - The facilitator highlights common goals and where goals overlap as each party communicates their perspective.
 - The facilitator encourages participants to keep the problem separated from the people involved. This may mean interrupting if things do get personal, but only to redirect the discussion.
 - The facilitator helps participants understand all the other perspectives by reframing, paraphrasing, or asking clarifying questions.

IN CONTEXT

A software company releases a product that requires a lot of customer support. The support team is upset by the heavy volume of calls. They feel the development team released a flawed product and are shielded from the consequences since they don't have to talk to angry customers. The development team feels the support team has simply not invested enough time in learning the product to help customers. Exacerbating the conflict is a feeling of unfairness experienced by the support team. The development team is paid more, on average, and has more flexible schedules. The development team also feels there is unfairness, since they are salaried workers who often work significant amounts of overtime without bonus pay.

To mitigate the conflict, a manager from another department facilitates a meeting. Members from both teams take turns, each person having five minutes to speak up without being interrupted. Nobody is allowed to respond or even brainstorm solutions until every person on both teams speaks up.

The goal is not to resolve the problem, but simply understand and appreciate the other team's point of view. The development team learns about core issues with the product that users are experiencing. The support team learns some of the reasoning behind the current product design. The development team airs their grievance that their training sessions on the new product were not well-attended. Members of the support team explain that the training sessions historically have not been very helpful; the development team tends to use tech-heavy jargon and moves too quickly through the product features. As each person speaks, the facilitator rephrases their comments and asks questions to make sure everyone understands each other. The facilitator also spots some shared goals, such as having an intuitive user experience.

Simply giving the groups a chance to discuss their conflict openly and constructively leads to some deeper revelations. Ultimately, both teams see an opportunity to involve support team members earlier in the development process. This improves customer service by giving support team members a deeper knowledge of new products. It also improves the products by allowing the user support team to give their input on design, based on their expertise with end users. The result is a better process for the company that might not have emerged without healthy, well-managed conflict.



THINK ABOUT IT

An insurance company worries that customer service associates are under-performing due to time spent mingling and need to be more accountable for their time. They introduce a new tracking system where staff log their time on each call. Staff complain that this system just takes more time out of their schedule and makes them less productive. After a few months tensions are high about the new system. How might this conflict be treated constructively?



TERM TO KNOW

Organizational Conflict

Conflict that is work-related between individuals or groups, and often constructive in nature.

2. Interpersonal Conflict

As shown above, sometimes conflict can lead to good outcomes. However, conflict can also be disastrous. A feud between individuals, or between cliques, can create a dysfunctional work environment, sap morale, and distract people from their jobs. This is especially true of **interpersonal conflict**, where differences aren't due to the work itself but simply due to clashing personalities or trivial disagreements. Interpersonal conflict is unlikely to lead to favorable outcomes, but should be managed and resolved before it degenerates into verbal assault and irreparable damage to a team. Like with organizational conflict, perhaps the worst way to deal with it is to ignore it and hope it goes away!

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Douglas and Allison share a workspace. Douglas is in the habit of taking tape, staplers, paperclips, and other office supplies from Allison's desk. He does so politely, but it begins to grate on her nerves that he doesn't stock supplies at his own desk. Douglas gets defensive, reminds Allison that supplies belong to the office, not individuals, and says it isn't "a big deal." Over time this leads to open bickering between the two that disrupts meetings and other day-to-day operations.

Assume that neither person is bullying or harassing the other, and that both are valuable colleagues who, for one reason or another, can't get along. They may come from different cultural backgrounds that result in different ideas of appropriate behavior, or they may just have incompatible personalities.



THINK ABOUT IT

Can you think of a time that you experienced no-fault interpersonal conflict? Maybe you had a classmate who got on your nerves, or a family member whose music irritated you. How did this conflict impact your relationship? Families and friends differ in their willingness to confront each other, but in a professional context it is even more difficult to address interpersonal conflict. At the same time, it can be important to resolve differences so they don't interfere with your working relationship.

Dealing with interpersonal conflict can be a difficult and uncomfortable process. Usually, as team members, professionals use carefully worded statements to avoid friction when confronting conflict. But the first step to resolving interpersonal conflict lies in acknowledging its existence. Recognizing the conflict allows team members to build common ground by putting the conflict within the context of the larger goals of the team and the organization. Moreover, the larger goals can help by giving team members a motive for resolving the conflict.

This may be less formal and a smaller group than a meeting to resolve organizational conflict, but resolving conflict like this can take the same practice as before—a good facilitator, active listening, and opportunities for all parties to be heard without interruption.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Recognizing that Douglas and Allison have interpersonal conflict affecting their own work and their colleagues, another colleague invites them to sit down to resolve the conflict. Both are embarrassed that their argument has affected others and are eager to put the conflict behind them. The facilitator gives them both time to talk without attacking the other or being defensive. After a discussion,

Douglas says he understands why Allison is annoyed by his behavior. Allison says she understands Douglas's feeling that office supplies are not personal property. While they don't find a solution to the conflict, both feel better by being heard, and resolve to not let their differences affect their colleagues or further damage their own working relationship.



BRAINSTORM

What are some interpersonal conflicts you've experienced or witnessed at work? Was the conflict ever resolved? What strategies could you have used to resolve it?



TERM TO KNOW

Interpersonal Conflict

Conflict between individuals that is often unhealthy and emotional in nature. Sometimes referred to as affective conflict.



SUMMARY

In this lesson you learned about **organization conflict**, as well as **interpersonal conflict** and some of the important differences. Organization conflict often leads to improved outcomes including creative problem-solving, innovation, and operational efficiencies. Interpersonal conflict is often unhealthy and emotionally-driven. Both forms of conflict need to be addressed through a facilitated discussion with opportunities for both sides to both listen and be heard.

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Business Communication Skills for Managers." Access for free at <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-businesscommunicationmgrs>. License **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Interpersonal Conflict

Conflict between individuals that is often unhealthy and emotional in nature. Sometimes referred to as affective conflict.

Organizational Conflict

Conflict that is work-related between individuals or groups, and often constructive in nature.