



# Conflict

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## Conflict

Conflict occurs when two or more parties have opposing attitudes or approaches to a particular situation, issue or person. Obvious sources of conflict range from a difference of opinion, problematic working conditions or unrealistic work expectations through discriminatory behaviour (such as racism or sexism), to poor communication or non-compliance with organisational norms or values.

There are situations where an ethical or practical issue emerges that you know should be confronted. Here, conflict can be positive - you may even have to create it temporarily. For example, a member of staff turns up late every day and the manager fails to confront the individual. This avoidance, may in future lead to a development of conflict through frustration and resentment in the other team members.

Conflict can occur between a member of staff and the manager, between two or more members of a team, or between departments, sections or managers. Whether you are involved directly affects whether you negotiate with someone else, apply grievance or disciplinary measures or mediate between other parties.

Conflict can be covert and take the form of resentment from a team member passed over for promotion or irritation caused by an individual's personal habits. Such conflict is much harder to detect and easier to ignore. Whichever type it is, all conflict still needs to be managed before it becomes a destructive force.

### Advantages

The Advantages of managing conflict situations are:

- better motivated staff; staff energies are directed to work rather than emotions
- an organisation or staff that presents a positive image to the outside world
- improved team work
- better personal development of individuals.

### Disadvantages

The Disadvantages of avoiding or failing to manage a conflict situation may include:

- it will fester and may spread to others
- staff energies become dissipated
- misdirected energies contribute to falling productivity
- inaction may be the easy option in the short term, but the problem ultimately will be harder to solve.

### Steps to resolve conflict:

#### 1. Recognise conflict

To handle conflict you have to spot it. Remember it can be overt - from an obvious or identifiable cause, clearly visible and defined, or covert - from a less obvious cause, hidden and with a potentially unrelated root source (eg a member of staff could apparently be in conflict with colleagues, when the real root cause is their perception that a supervisor's treatment of them is discriminatory).

## 2. Monitor the climate

Monitoring the climate at work gives you an early warning system, which makes it far easier to deal with conflict swiftly and efficiently before it gets out of hand. This does not mean constantly being on your guard; it simply means being prepared and keeping your eyes open. If you see a likely conflict situation, don't turn a blind eye. Early action saves time and stress later.

## 3. Research the situation

Take time to find out the real cause of the conflict, who is involved, what the key issue is, and what its actual and potential effects are. Empathise - see the situation from other people's point of view rather than come to snap judgements.

## 4. Plan the approach

Don't take sides. Instead, encourage the parties concerned to examine the interests behind their position and try to create a climate of exchange so that the parties may deal with each other more constructively next time. Work out a strategy based on what this investigation has shown. Managers should decide upon the result they want to achieve, bearing in mind that, as different evidence emerges, this outcome may not always be possible.

## 5. Handle the issue

Stay in control of the situation. Handling conflict is a difficult process which can create extreme emotions. Use the following techniques.

- Stay calm - take time to respond, don't give a knee-jerk reaction. If necessary take a rain check until everyone involved is calm enough to discuss the issues rationally and constructively.
- Listen to the points of view of all involved and take time to understand all the issues involved in the conflict. It is important to remember that people will be more open and honest if they feel they have a receptive and interested audience. Think about your body language and spoken language.
- Avoid **fight** or **flight**. The instinctive human reaction to conflict is either to run away, or face it and fight. Neither of these approaches is constructive. **Flight** avoids solving the conflict and leads to loss of respect. **Fighting** back or being aggressive to one or both parties when you are not personally involved causes greater long term conflict and intimidates staff.
- Stay assertive - this means avoiding being either passive or aggressive; neither is assertive, and each is a short term approach unlikely to solve the conflict.
  - Passive behaviour = apologising, withdrawn body language, always accepting the other person's point of view whether it is right or not.
  - Aggressive behaviour = being authoritarian, rarely listening to reasoned argument.

An assertive approach is generally the best way to handle conflict and it means:

- acknowledging the views and rights of all parties
- encouraging the parties to find the causes of the conflict - and solutions
- trying to ensure that opinions and thoughts are expressed honestly and openly
- suggesting a constructive way forward.

## **6. Let everyone have their say**

If you have managed to get the parties around a table for discussion in a climate where exchange is possible then a compromise solution may now be feasible. Remember that your desired solution must hit a wide range of targets. It must:

- help to build good working relationships
- be legitimate, non-discriminatory and compatible with organisational practice
- recognise all parties' alternatives
- help to improve communication
- help to generate a lasting commitment to the solution.

## **7. Find the way forward**

The most important aspect of handling a conflict situation is to find an acceptable way forward. Examine the options and decide what to do next. Can you reach a compromise acceptable to both, or all, sides? If not, what action needs to be taken to prevent the conflict from continuing? Make sure everyone knows what the conclusion is and what they are expected to do.

The next steps need to be agreed and spelled out - it could be an individual's need for counselling, the likelihood of disciplinary proceedings or an agreement to be followed (even moving a member of staff to another department if there is a deep-rooted personal antagonism). Sometimes there may be problems relating to health or psychology - you have to judge where your limits lie in resolving apparently intractable personal antagonisms.

## **8. Appraise - don't dwell**

It is important to learn from conflict situations and move forward. Don't dwell on the past and re-open old wounds.

Appraise the conflict and the way it was handled. Decide what can be learned from this. How can similar conflicts be avoided in the future? How could it be handled better next time? Learn from the experience - and keep your eye on what has been resolved, to stop it flaring up again.

### **Dos and don'ts for handling a conflict situation**

#### **Do**

- Tackle conflict early, to avoid it escalating.
- Think it through and plan how to deal with the conflict.
- Refrain from offering your own opinion before understanding the full picture.
- Try to avoid instinctive reactions.
- Stay assertive.

#### **Don't**

- Take it personally (unless it is personal), it is a fact of life.
- Avoid the issue and ignore the conflict.
- Fight anger with anger.
- Jump in without assessing and understanding the problem.
- Run away.

- Handle conflict in public.