

Introduction to Conflict in the Workplace

(and How it Erodes Productivity & Culture)



Why should you prepare for workplace conflict?



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Introduction

Differences of opinions along with differing experiences, values, and ideas can lead to conflict between people, including employees in the workplace. Conflict may be inevitable, but it can erode workplace camaraderie and a company's positive culture if not successfully managed. Workplace conflict can come in many guises. Sometimes it's a single disagreement; at other times, it may be a difficult relationship fraught with chronic arguing and disagreements.

Roughly **85% of workers** report experiencing workplace conflict. Nearly 50% of employees believe that conflict in their workplace is due to personality clashes. 25% of employees report seeing conflict lead to absences or sickness. When conflict becomes a negative factor in an office or other work setting, it can reduce productivity and increase employee turnover. Managers who

ignore conflict (or take part in it) often find themselves left with an unhappy business culture and lots of disgruntled employees.

Today, conflict is more widespread than ever in communities at large. Political, economic, and social divides not only lead to heated exchanges on social media, at school board meetings, or even in local supermarkets, but also in warehouses, factories, retail shops, and high-rise office buildings. In the workplace, conflict might arise from differences in opinions associated with work or simply from the cultural or personality differences that people bring into the workplace with them each day. Knowing that conflict is inescapable when it comes to human interactions, employers should be prepared to address conflict with appropriate measures, guiding employees to cope with conflict by appropriate means. Conflict

can arise at any level of the organization, between management and employees, between managers, or between employees. It can also involve employees and customers or clients.

Having a set of conflict strategies in place and measures to take when conflict occurs can prevent arguments from undermining the overall positive nature of a workforce. In this guide, we'll discuss actionable measures that companies can take to effectively manage conflict when it occurs. Allowing conflict to run rampant will only sabotage the organization's productivity. By addressing conflict in healthy ways, employers can limit its negative impact and increase positive outcomes. The following strategies can help employers and their teams handle conflict in the workplace with more success.

Be Proactive about Dealing with Conflict

Resolving conflict offers so many benefits that it's tough to understand why so many people avoid doing it. The problem? Many people dislike confrontations. And that's not all; some people enjoy them to the extent that their personality and communication skills give them a decided edge when arguing. However, disliking the idea of confronting workers or other colleagues about a conflict will only allow the conflict to deepen and the relationship to become more fractured.

For companies who want to minimize the role that conflict plays in shaping their culture, it's important to be proactive about managing conflict by giving management and employees the strategies and guidelines they need in order to successfully work out their differences. Steps for initially dealing with conflicts can be simple; resolution can begin with an informal discussion. If the two parties still cannot work out a resolution, a manager (or more senior executive) can be brought into the resolution process.



Confrontation Is Good

Many people have a notion that confrontation is negative and, as such, is something to be avoided. A company that is proactive about conflict resolution has to transform the perception of confrontation into something positive while instructing staff about the best ways to confront a problem with a colleague. Confrontational people have a reputation for 'upsetting the applecart' or downright causing trouble, but workers who repeatedly instigate problems are a different matter; employees who confront conflict with the purpose of resolving it successfully show the positive side of confrontation.

Moreover, confronting a problem is different than merely confronting another individual

with assertiveness. When workers understand that the goal of workplace conflict resolution is to confront problems without getting personal (although, this may be inevitable when disputes occur because of personality conflicts), they may become more comfortable with the idea of confronting conflicts head on.

By refusing to ignore serious conflicts, companies can prevent them from growing. The goal for organizations is to be mindful about conflict--it will occur--and to be prepared to exercise positive conflict resolution strategies when conflicts arise.



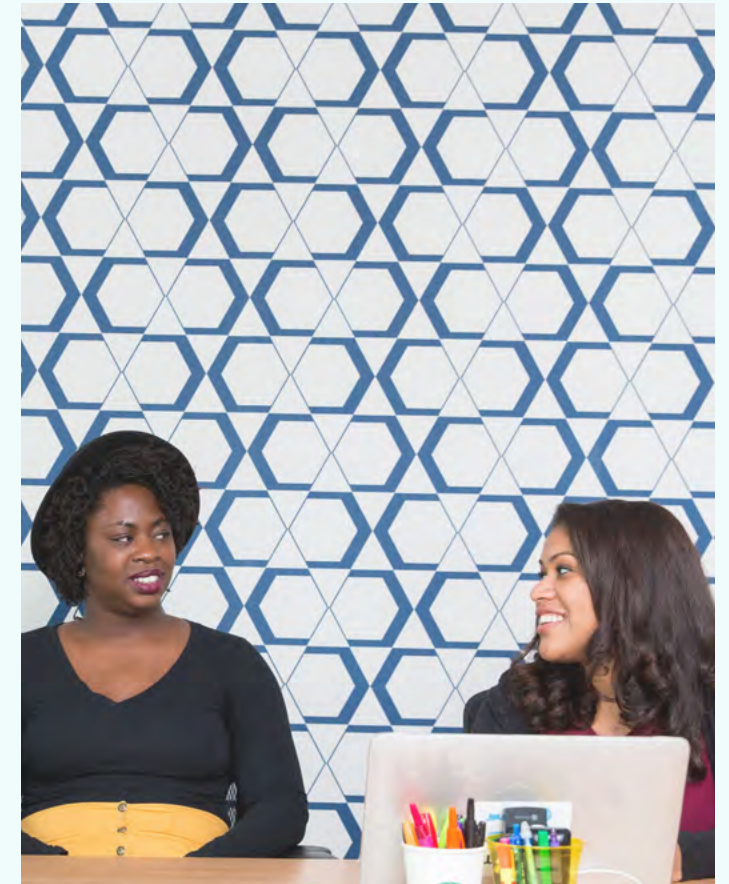
Define the Conflict, Define the Problem

What is a workplace conflict exactly? Typically human resources personnel will define conflict in the workplace as sharp disagreements. In any organization where people work together, conflicts are inevitable and perfectly natural. Of course, there are numerous reasons why conflicts arise and countless examples of workplace conflicts that can threaten to undermine employee morale and trigger a drop in productivity.

It's almost impossible to address a problem unless you define it. In order to successfully deal with any problem, parties must understand what the problem is. Defining the conflict should reveal the source of the conflict. For instance, the conflict may appear to be

that 'Jim and Judy don't work well together,' but that's merely the result of the conflict (reduced productivity), but the actual problem could be any number of things ranging from Jim's procrastination to Judy's deviation from company policies.

When parties are able to define what is actually causing sharp disagreements to occur, they can create more effective solutions. Even conflicts that are highly personal can be managed with positive changes or strategies.



What Are Some Classic Workplace Conflicts?

Workplace conflicts can arise for lots of different reasons, but there are some types that seem to occur over and over again in just about any type of workplace setting. Recognizing them enables managers and workers to confront them more quickly. Here are just a few common types of workplace conflicts that should never be ignored:

- Leadership conflicts: the business leader or managers ignore workforce or micromanage employees.
- Interdependence conflicts: Judy can't do her job until Jim does his part.
- Work styles: Judy is highly organized and submits work long before deadlines; Jim turns in work at the last minute.
- Personality conflicts: Jim is an extrovert. Judy is an introvert.
- Battle of ideas: Jim and Judy often compete for their idea to be adopted by the company.

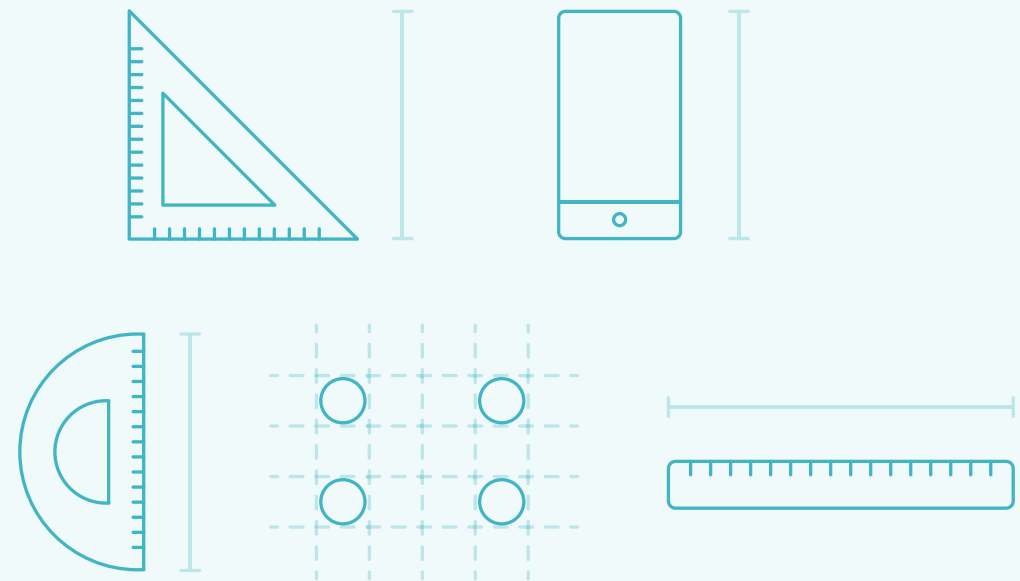
After defining the problem, the parties involved can begin the resolution process. In Jim and Judy's case, the conflicts may require the assistance of management to help the two compromise and resolve their differences as they arise.

The truth is, companies need types of people like Jim and Judy to be part of their team. Both have talent and bring different benefits to the team. When approaching conflicts, it's crucial for parties involved to remember that each party is intrinsically valuable to the team and, as such, warrants respect in spite of their differences of opinion. When parties respect one another, it's easier to reach agreeable resolutions. When parties don't respect one another? That's actually the source of a conflict and should be dealt with as such.

Establish Guidelines for Discussion and Resolution Communication Strategies

As we mentioned earlier, not all employees are comfortable with confrontation. This often means that employees who aren't confrontational or feel confident in their ability to argue (or communicate assertively verbally) are less likely to call attention to a disagreement until it's been allowed to fester for a while.

Of course, companies can make a point to denote that conflict resolution is a core job competency, but in the real world, not all employees have a sharp command of this skill. That doesn't mean that their position is invalid or that they don't provide valuable service to the organization. Often, early conflict resolution occurs because employees don't have multiple communication strategies they can rely on to confront a problem. Even so, there are some ways that companies can nurture improved communication with an eye toward successful conflict resolution.



Problems with Verbal Communication and Put It in Writing

Many companies employ employees who simply do not communicate verbally as well as other employees. In fact, there may be language barriers or cultural barriers. Many workers come from a cultural background where verbal confrontation is not viewed favorably or well tolerated. Consequently, organizations may need to handle some conflicts differently. For instance, mediators or senior managers can choose to meet one on one with involved parties in order to achieve a clear understanding of the matter. Then, they can schedule a formal meeting to start the resolution process.

Verbal communication has many limitations. During discussions when emotions are running high, employees may forget to make key points. As mentioned, some employees may not be verbally assertive and lack the skills and confidence to argue their point. Naturally, this may be an area for future training, but for the conflict at hand, it makes sense to request employees to put their perspective in writing, particularly if the conflict is complex or involves multiple incidents.

Writing is also a more formal method for documenting a problem. Again, some employees may or may not be comfortable with written documentation of conflicts, but it is an option. It's definitely an important option for serious conflicts that may involve serious policy breaches or accusations from one employee to another.



Ask Employees and Obtain Multiple Perspectives

Another strategy that companies can take when addressing conflicts is simply to ask the involved parties how they'd prefer to communicate their perspective. By offering options for communications, employers can make sure that employees are more likely to choose one that best suits their skills and personality.

There are often times where it's ideal to limit the discussion of a conflict to just the parties involved, but that's not always the case, especially when the conflict may address many employees. In order to find the best solution to a serious conflict, it can be helpful to obtain multiple perspectives from more than simply the two or three individuals directly involved in a disagreement.

First, managers may want to elicit background details about a conflict in order to define it

more properly. Getting two sides to a problem sometimes isn't enough. For instance, police officers often find it difficult to resolve traffic disputes between two involved parties without relying on witness accounts.

For instance, let's say Jim and Judy are struggling with a conflict that involves sharing resources--sharing copiers, printers, hardware, etc. ...Management may wish to broach the topic with other employees in the department to see if they are also finding resource sharing to be a problem. If so, the solution will need to involve the department and not just Judy and Jim.

Secondly, it can be helpful to invite other employees to participate in the resolution process. What ideas do other employees have for resolving problems like shared resources?

The truth is, other employees are often indirectly involved when there are sharp disagreements between two parties. Inviting their participation may ensure better outcomes for everyone on the team.



Formal Versus Informal Employee Discussions

Ideally, handling conflict on an informal basis will leave most parties feeling comfortable and able to offer their perspective. This is why it's often ideal for guidelines to include informal discussion rather than jumping straight into more formal meetings — even if the proceedings amount to much the same thing. Informal handling of conflicts is often enough to achieve a positive outcome.

Depending on the nature of the problem, supervisors or conflict mediators may invite multiple perspectives on an informal basis by simply asking them verbally to provide their perspective on a problem or emailing them with questions and asking them to submit

written responses. Ideally, responses should be voluntary. Some employees may also want to have assurance that their perspectives will remain confidential. This is something employers will have to consider carefully. Some matters may be worthy of confidentiality while others may demand open participation. When there are multiple viewpoints of an issue, there's a strong likelihood that its full scope will be understood. That's important in order to create a strong resolution to serious problems. Inviting multiple perspectives and contemplating each one takes time, but for serious matters, this is often the ideal way to achieve a successful outcome.



Brainstorm for Resolutions and Focus on Resolutions

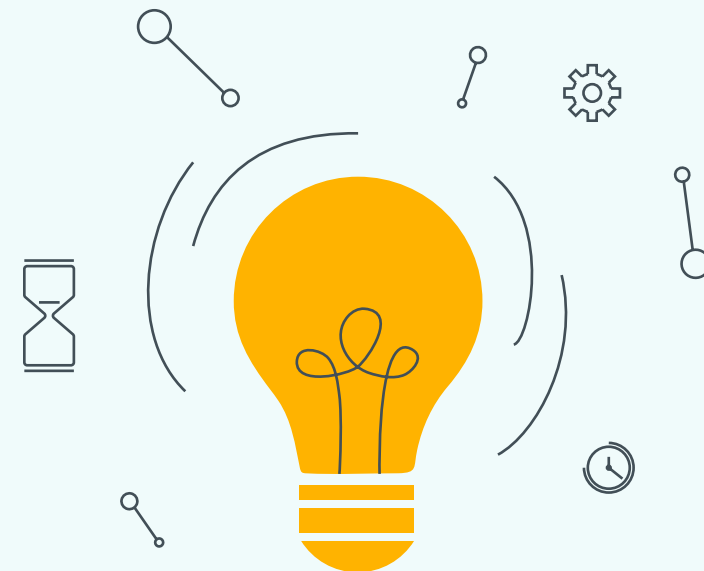
After the conflict at hand is well understood by everyone involved, the resolution process can begin. In fact, all parties should understand that the goal of conflict confrontation is to develop positive resolutions. Of course, 'positive' is a subjective descriptor; in some cases, employees may be left feeling negative after the resolution process if the resolution isn't something they support. Sometimes it's impossible to please all affected parties; in such cases, the issue may require temporary resolutions with a time frame for revisiting the problem.

Once disagreeing parties have offered their perspectives, managers or meeting moderators can request their ideas for possible resolutions to the problem. Take a conflict like Judy and Jim's interdependence conflict. Say that Judy cannot perform her required accounting tasks until Jim performs his. Judy may offer the resolution that Jim turns his work in early. Jim may want the resolution to include a stop to Judy's continual requests for his work even though he has not missed his deadline. The problem is largely a time issue. One

resolution would be to move Jim's deadlines up so that Judy always has the interdependent work she needs so that she isn't facing last minute deadlines.

Seems simple enough. But let's visit the office to check in. Unfortunately, Jim also can't complete his portion of the work that Judy needs because the numbers he uses aren't ready in time for an earlier deadline. So then what?

One resolution would be for management to acknowledge Judy's positive goal for getting work in before deadlines and to extend her deadline based on a careful overview of the time details associated with the problem.



Weigh the Possibilities

Once there are some strong resolution possibilities on the table, the impacted parties can weigh their pros and cons before finally choosing one to employ. After choosing one, it's important to have each employee's confirmation that they're willing to support the decision, at least until the follow-up meeting that can be used to gauge the success or failure of the resolution. The fact is, some resolutions will fail or simply need to be refined to more effectively solve the issue. On the other hand, many resolutions that are thoughtfully chosen will lead to conflict resolution.

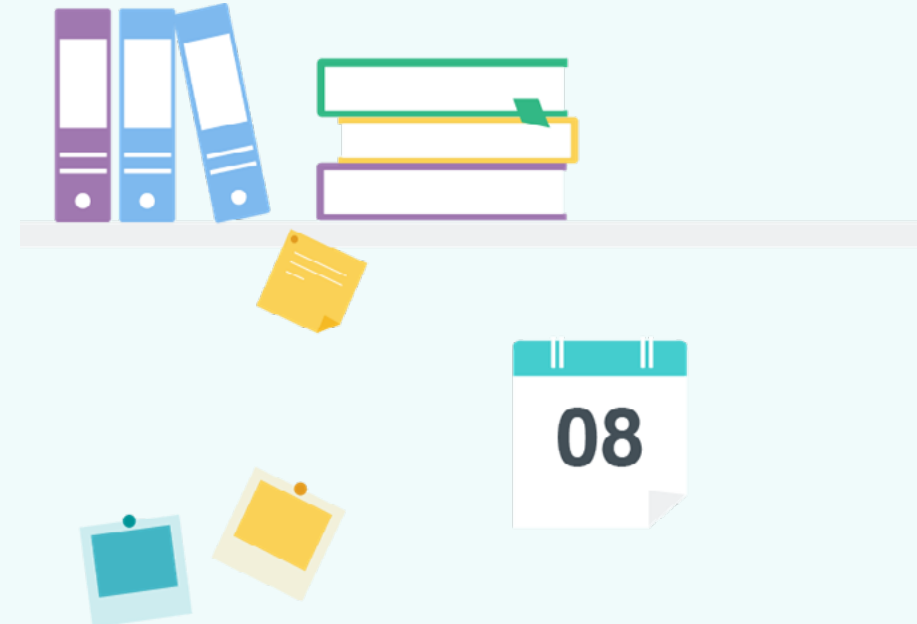


Create an Action Plan and Formalize the Plan

Strong resolutions don't happen without a plan for implementing them. Often, resolutions involve multiple steps and require a good plan for adopting their measures. For instance, let's say the conflict doesn't involve two employees like Judy and Jim but, instead, an entire department. One classic conflict involves the adoption of new software and the training it requires. New software or hardware can throw a workforce into chaos. How does a company deal with complex problems like this? On the other hand, how does a company put a resolution in place that involves an employee making changes to their work style such as being less micromanaging or producing improved communication?

The 'how' is precisely why resolution action plans are integral to the conflict resolution process. Putting solutions into place often requires a set steps. Who is responsible for taking these steps? How long will the solution take to implement? What if problems arise during the solution's implementation? A strong action plan provides a roadmap for putting the resolution into action.

No matter how simple the resolution might be from the perspective of some of the affected parties, it's bound to be complicated or confusing to someone. Therefore, to avoid any issues getting the resolution in place, formalize it in writing. Even if your conflict discussion was simply informal, be sure to document the adopted resolution and its implementation plan so that it can be referred to easily. This step will also help when it comes time to revisit the conflict to gauge how the solution is proceeding.



Failures to Resolve

There are many workplace issues that are quite difficult to resolve even with strong action plans. That doesn't mean they shouldn't be addressed and addressed again to solve successfully. Here's a difficult situation: Jim and Judy's departmental manager is Jim's good friend. They often go out for drinks after work; sometimes their families get together. Judy believes that Jim receives favorable treatment and that she is unlikely to benefit even when resolution plans are put in place because they're either favorable to Jim or Jim receives no penalty when he fails to comply with part of the resolution.

Yes. Situations involving preferential treatment or even perceived preference are commonplace conflicts too. In terms of the department, Judy is essential to the team's productivity. Without a strong resolution that is fairly implemented, she's likely to become disenchanted by the company and may even accept a job elsewhere. That doesn't solve the problem for Emily who will take her place and may contend with the same issue.

Consequently, when putting action plans into place, it's important to ensure that they are, indeed, acted out and that there are clear guidelines for adhering to the solution as well as potential penalties for failing to do so.



Workshops, Training and Workplace Continuing Education. Everyone Can Benefit from Conflict Resolution Training.

Conflict confrontation and resolution isn't easy. Moreover, it's not a skill that employees always learn during training or during their education process and, yet, employers count on employees to have these skills as part of their core competencies. Lamenting the difficulty inherent in workplace conflict is no strategy for coping with it. Instead, companies have an opportunity to be more proactive about dealing with workplace conflict and ensuring that employees improve their conflict management skills through training.

Many companies require employees to undergo some types of continuing training or education. Topics can vary tremendously. However, businesses can emphasize the importance of conflict resolution and their commitment to it by offering workshops, seminars or training sessions that focus on how to deal with conflict. These types of workshops can be highly educational for helping employees understand the different types of conflicts and how to address them appropriately. Training sessions can also focus on how to develop strategies and resolutions for dealing with many types of common workplace dis-

agreements. Companies' own HR departments can develop these types of programs or the company may choose to invite outside consultants to tackle the topic for them.

Sometimes companies automatically assume that their HR staffers or executives have highly developed conflict resolution skills. This is a dangerous assumption, and employees are apt to tell a different story. Therefore, it's helpful to encourage employees at all levels to improve their conflict management skills. Everyone can benefit from training or workshops designed to help them address conflicts with other colleagues.



Follow Up on Conflicts, Conclusion and Following Up with Impacted Parties

A common failure of conflict resolution is to walk away from the issue and never revisit it or assume that the resolution worked. Sometimes resolutions fail spectacularly and associated staff are just too disillusioned to attempt the resolution process again. Sometimes the resolution only works in part and requires some adjusting to improve its success.

All parties involved in the conflict and its resolution should understand that followup is crucial to good outcomes. Ideally, the conflict mediator should set up a time frame for revisiting the topic with a few scheduled meetings. These meetings needn't be formal unless the resolution is proving to be unhelpful. Then, a more formal process for handling the conflict may be necessary.

Seemingly smooth workflow doesn't necessarily mean that a resolution is successful. It's important for managers or conflict mediators

to talk to the impacted parties to gauge their feelings on the implemented resolution. If the involved parties feel that the conflict has been resolved, no further action may be needed. If there are still problems, the resolution can be refined or new strategies may be developed to improve the situation.



Wrap-Up

Conflict in the workplace is often quite complex. Few issues are black and white and will require complex resolutions. The sooner that people confront these problems, the less negative impact they may have on productivity and workplace culture. Ignoring conflicts only allows them to fester and impede the company further. Leaving conflicts unaddressed can alienate staff and lead to the loss of talent, a problem that can impede productivity as well as a company's bottom line.

These strategies can help your company or organization improve how it both views and manages conflict. If you're a company manager and you're still finding it difficult to solve workplace conflicts, it may be helpful to hire outside consultants to help you or your team develop and implement workplace conflict strategies.



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