

War Zone **OR** Idea Zone

[Effectively Managing Conflict in Your Workplace]



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“Conflict can destroy a team which hasn’t spent time learning to deal with it.”

- William Walton

The High Price of Conflict

According to a study by the Society of Human Resource Management, “HR managers report spending between 24 and 60 percent of their time dealing with employee disputes.” *(Source: Six tips to managing workplace conflict, CNN.com article)*

When people work with people, they are going to disagree from time to time. Squabbles happen, and without proper management, simple disagreements can escalate into full-blown battles: turf disputes about roles, responsibilities and territories, policy disagreements about how things should be done, even personality and style clashes.

Whatever the type, chronic workplace conflict leads to:

- **Loss of synergy** – office morale suffers and co-workers do not want to work together.
- **Lost productivity** – job performance suffers when employees are distracted by conflict.
- **Administrative and legal costs** – valuable time and money is wasted settling disputes.
- **Perception costs** – groups of workers who continually argue are viewed as less competent and trustworthy by others in the company.
- **Turnover and attrition** – good people eventually tire of the negative environment and leave for a better corporate culture.
- **Toxic company reputation** – in extreme cases, an organization suffering from chronic conflict can develop a “toxic” reputation, repelling top performers.



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“If it weren’t for people, the workplace would be very easy to manage.”

- Steven A. Watson

Conflict is Inevitable – But It Doesn’t Have To Be Destructive

Employees are more than a mere collection of job skills. Each person shows up for work each day as just that – a person – bringing along a complex mix of emotions, experiences, personality, values, ambitions, wants and needs. While this mix often yields innovation and collaboration among co-workers, it can also lead to conflict. Here are some ways managers typically deal with this conflict:

- **Avoid or deny** – ignore it long enough and the problem will go away.
- **React emotionally** – become angry, aggressive or fearful.
- Make excuses and place blame.
- **Delegate** – make it someone else’s problem.

Defense mechanisms such as these can have disastrous consequences for your organization.

But conflict doesn’t have to be destructive. In fact, conflict can be very healthy for a work group – with the right management.

As a manager, you influence whether a disagreement turns your company into a war zone, or instead fuels creative problem solving. The key lies in how you manage conflict.



**“Don’t be afraid of opposition.
Remember, a kite rises against,
not with, the wind.”**

- Hamilton Mabie



Effectively Managing Conflict – A Seven Step Process

Don't fight conflict. It's a normal part of business. If you feel uncomfortable or anxious about dealing with conflict, don't worry – none of us is born knowing how to deal with differences of opinion. Effectively managing conflict is simply a skill you must learn, then in turn teach to employees.

Seven Steps for Managing Conflict:

- 1. Identify the problem** – make sure everyone knows what the issue is.
- 2. Assemble all antagonists** – give each a few minutes to present his perspective and opinion, following these rules:
 - Do not interrupt.
 - Give everyone equal time to speak.
 - Meet together – never meet with parties individually.
- 3. Set expectations** – let all parties involved know you will not take sides, and are committed to ensuring resolution. Express your confidence in their abilities. Tell them you expect them to resolve the conflict as civil adults.
- 4. Actively listen** – encourage all parties to use active listening – restating, in your own words, what the other person has said.
 - This key conflict resolution skill demonstrates that you understand and are concerned about the other's point of view.
 - Responses have two components: naming the feeling the other person is expressing, and stating the reason he feels that way (e.g., “It sounds like you're annoyed by Jim's lateness.”).
 - Active listening promotes better communication and has a calming effect in emotional situations.



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Seven Steps for Managing Conflict Continued:

5. De-escalate when necessary – use conflict de-escalation to keep the discussion from turning into an argument. Tips for de-escalating:

- Stick with “I” statements; avoid “you” statements.
- Focus on work behaviors; don’t allow personal attacks.
- Do not allow name-calling or put-downs.
- Require antagonists to stay factual and avoid sweeping generalities.
- Encourage participants to use a civil tone; soften your tone as well.
- Make sure body language is civil as well (crossed arms, clenched fists and eye rolling can be as hostile as spoken words).
- Take a time-out if needed to cool down.
- Acknowledge different points of view.

6. Make changes – discuss and commit to making changes necessary to resolving the conflict.

- Ask each participant to describe specific actions they’d like to see the other party take.
- Have participants verbalize what the other could do more of, less of, stop or start.
- Figure out what needs to be done, realistically, to achieve each individual’s goals.
- Find an area of compromise – is there some point on which everyone agrees? Use this as a starting point. If there is no area of agreement, focus on a common long-term goal and begin from there.
- Come away from the discussion with concrete steps each participant will take toward resolving the conflict.

7. Review progress – once commitments are made, set a time to review progress – hold participants accountable for living up to their commitments.

“You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.”

- Indira Gandhi



Create a Formal Process for Dealing with Conflict

You have a formal process for training sales people and processing payroll. What about resolving conflicts? Establishing formal guidelines for managing conflict will increase everyone's comfort level and ultimately yield better results. If you don't have one already, use these steps to create a process that makes sense for your organization:

1. **Expect conflict** – realize that friction will occasionally emerge in the course of human work relationships. Make it a rule to deal with conflict immediately – never sweep it under the rug.
2. **Get employee buy-in** – involve them in creating your formal resolution process. Consider creating a simple survey to get a pulse on the types of conflict your employees experience.
3. **Make it routine** – set a regular time and place for airing grievances.
4. **Follow the system** – use the seven step process to resolve disputes before major conflicts arise.
5. **Put your process in writing** – give a copy to every employee and make it part of your new hire packet.
6. **Education** – provide employees with formal conflict resolution training.
7. **Use incentives** – find a way to reward employees for resolving conflicts in a civil, healthy way.

"Instead of suppressing conflicts, specific channels could be created to make this conflict explicit, and specific methods could be set up by which conflict is resolved."

- Albert Low





**“An ounce of prevention is worth
a pound of cure.”**

- Benjamin Franklin

Be Proactive – Manage Conflict by Preventing It

- 1. Nip conflict in the bud** – bring up troublesome issues before they become problems.
- 2. Identify triggers** – situations that cause the greatest discord in your business. Employees can be especially useful in identifying triggers.
- 3. Search for hidden sources of conflict** – sometimes, the real source for conflict is not readily apparent. Look at both the overall function of a group, as well as what is happening at the micro-level (individual personalities, goals, communication patterns) to determine how to head-off conflicts.
- 4. Get everyone on the same page** – make sure all employees understand job descriptions, individual and company goals, etc. In fact, many conflicts can be prevented when employees understand their respective roles.
- 5. Accentuate the positive** – recognize and praise accomplishments to minimize “jockeying for position” that generates friction among competitive employees.
- 6. Encourage healthy debate about work issues** – discussions based on differing opinions and perspectives can build tolerance and patience among team members, diffusing tensions before they mount.
- 7. Ignore and discourage gossip** – be a leader and role model by refusing to gossip, actively or passively.



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“Conflict lies at the core of innovation.”

- Emanuel R. Piore

The Upside of Well-Managed Conflict

Given all the negatives of workplace conflict, managers often view it as a problem that needs to be eliminated. But when managed properly, workplace conflict does have its upside. In fact, it can even be healthy.

Here are a Few of the Benefits:

- **Improved working relationships** – when disagreements are resolved in a controlled and civil manner, employees’ respect for one another grows.
- **Catalyst for creativity** – conflict yields innovation – it provides a work group with opportunities to learn, grow and develop new solutions.
- **Fewer headaches** – in general, managers who deal with conflict successfully experience fewer employee complaints than managers who fail to do so.
- **Time and money savings** – informal complaint resolution reduces administrative processing and eliminates legal fees.





“One kind action
leads to another.”

- Amelia Earhart

The Domino Effect

Successfully managing conflict has a positive domino effect, allowing managers to create a workplace where employees thrive:

- Even when disagreements occur, civility and respect shown during conflict resolution will foster a sense of peace and goodwill in an otherwise stressful workplace.
- Less stress yields a more harmonious work environment.
- A well-balanced work environment allows employees to focus more on their jobs.
- Improved focus leads to higher quality work – a real incentive for all organizations to effectively manage workplace conflict.



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