

# Managing Workplace Conflict

## Be a Coach, not a Cop

Workplace conflict will occur even in professional environments, but the conflict needs to be redirected from the perception of customers. In most conflicts neither party is right or wrong; different perceptions have collided to create disagreement. By managing conflict skillfully, you can gain cooperation, improve performance, reduce stress, solve problems quickly, enhance teamwork, foster creativity, and increase staff morale.

To manage conflict effectively you must be a skilled communicator; an open environment encourages employees to talk about work issues. Ask questions and focus on problems as perceived. It may be as simple as conflicts about desk position, air temperature control, public address volume, or choice of background music, if that is what you have. Here are some points to consider:

- Acknowledge that a workplace conflict exists. Find out what's happening and be open about the problem. Inquire of both employees together to avoid appearing to favor one or the other. Honest and clear communications is important.
- Let them express their views. Feelings of anger and hurt usually accompany workplace conflict situations. Let these emotions be expressed before any problem solving takes place. After the initial venting, let quiet discussion prevail.
- Define the problem. What is the problem, and what are the negative aspects on work and relationships? Is differing personalities the issue? Sometimes age difference feeds the workplace conflict. Are there deeper underlying causes of conflict?
- Determine underlying needs. The goal is not to find who is right or wrong, but to reach a solution everybody can live with. Compromise is the rule, but sometimes you need to go beyond that. Look first for needs rather than solutions. Find out why each party is asking for their fix to the problem.
- Find common areas of agreement. Agree on the problem, the procedure to follow, and the worst fears. Some small changes can be helpful at the outset to give experience of some success.
- Find solutions to satisfy needs. Generate multiple alternatives, and determine which actions will be taken. Make sure both sides buy into actions. Silence indicates reserve, meaning no agreement. Seek to obtain real agreement from both sides. A veiled warning about continuing workplace conflict may dampen the fire before it leads to serious actions.
- Determine follow-up you will take to monitor actions. Schedule a follow-up meeting in two weeks to determine how everybody is doing.

What if workplace conflict remains unresolved? Unresolved workplace conflict can be a disruption in operations, and other avenues may need to be explored. An outside facilitator may be able to shed light on possible solutions. When conflict becomes a performance issue, it may lead to coaching sessions, performance appraisals, or disciplinary action.

Anger - Dealing with anger, especially when it is directed to you, can be a challenge. Effective listening can help defuse anger, but when it is directed to you, it is difficult to respond definitively. Ask for staff backup to help regulate the situation. An angry person needs to let off steam that may have been building for some time. Show that you are paying attention. The person needs to know that someone is really listening to her point of view. In addition, the person needs to feel that you empathize with her and acknowledge that you understand the situation. Be attentive and patient, and the

party will become less angry as she expresses herself. Be sincere as you honestly validate the situation causing anger. Finally, be calm as you hear sometimes inflammatory comments in the heat of the moment.

Workplace conflict resolution resources &ndash; The Conflict Resolution Center Int&rsquo;l in Pittsburgh, PA is a non-profit organization promoting non-violent approaches to conflict resolution. They maintain an excellent library on line, and they offer various publications for those interested in these issues. Managing Conflict is the web page of Douglas Noll, attorney and peacemaker. His thesis is that peacemaking is the best route to follow. The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University deals with academic research into conflict management. Finally, CaseBreakers specializes in internet based criminal records and background checks.