

Conflict resolution tips and techniques

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Introduction

Conflict is inevitable, especially at work. When you are around people with different personalities, opinions, or values, it can sometimes lead to disagreements.

While it may appear to be negative, conflict isn't always a bad thing. It can lead to better understanding in the future, and the highlighting of issues you may not have been aware of.

It can also bring about positive change in organisations, and when handled well, can equip employees with the skills they need to constructively manage conflict and disagreements in the future.

Resolving conflict

It is important to know how to manage conflict when it arises. Well-managed conflict can lead to better working relationships in the long run, whereas poorly managed conflict can cause a toxic work environment.



Acknowledge when a problem exists.

When conflict arises, don't ignore it. Acknowledge when it happens, and encourage employees involved to be proactive in trying to resolve it.

Set ground rules

Before any discussion begins, it is important to set ground rules so everyone is clear on what is acceptable behaviour and come into the discussion with a shared set of expectations.

Some ground rules you may set are treating each other respectfully, not interrupting others, and giving each other a chance to speak and voice their opinions.

Let each person tell their story

Make sure that everyone involved in the conflict is given a chance to have their voice heard. No matter your preconceptions, everyone's feelings and thoughts need to be acknowledged to come to a productive and fair conclusion.

Get to the root of the problem

Try to delve deeper to find out exactly what the problem is. Ask employees to be as objective as possible, focusing on the facts and things that can be changed.

Make sure they're aware not to turn this into a personal attack on the individual(s) they disagree with.

Ask them to explain clearly what happened or to provide specific examples of the issue, and the impact this has had on them or their team.

Understand underlying needs and interests

Once you have understood the problem, you need to understand what employees want or need to get out of the conflict being resolved.

Are there particular things they would like the other party to do differently? Why?

Be a neutral and active listener

Remain neutral throughout, and don't favour one side over another.

Listen to both sides of the disagreement and make sure that each party has equal opportunity to contribute.

How to facilitate productive conversations

Play referee

Paraphrase

Use incomplete sentences

Gather input

Find a baseline

Comparison to the ideal

Play referee

By overseeing mediating the conversation, you can make sure that people take turns, follow the ground rules, and behave appropriately and respectfully.

- If participants are not respecting ground rules, nip this behaviour in the bud and redirect the conversation.
- Give each person an equal amount of time to contribute their thoughts. If this isn't happening naturally, be ready to step in.
- If there are long pauses in which people aren't talking, restart the conversation by asking questions that prompt people to think or share their opinions.
- If someone is speaking for too long, step in to break up the conversation and give the other side a chance to contribute.

Paraphrase

Summarising what someone has said can help all parties ensure that they have understood correctly what that person is saying. This reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings occurring.

You can either paraphrase, or you can ask an individual from one group to summarise what the other has said to check they have understood.

Use incomplete sentences

One technique you could think about using to get precise responses is providing employees with incomplete sentences and asking them to fill in the blanks.

For example, you could try to following:

- *“I think you could have approached ___ differently.”*
- *“When you ____, it made me feel ____.”*
- *“I think I could have done ___ differently.”*
- *“I would like ___ to happen going forward so that ____.”*

Gather input

Ask for the input of the parties involved to better understand what they would like to come out of the conversation, or what they would like you to do in your role as mediator.

This prompts them to think about the future and potential solutions, instead of fixating on the issues that have led to conflict or disagreement.

Find a baseline

Finding a baseline is helpful because it highlights a place of common understanding. It allows people to take a step back and look at the bigger picture.

Ask questions to get to a place where everyone is in agreement. For example:

- *“What are our main goals?”*
- *“What role does each person play in meeting that goal?”*
- *“What expectations do we have of each other?”*
- *“How do these tie in with our company values?”*

Comparison to the ideal

The final technique is asking individuals to compare what has happened previously with what they would like to happen in future.

This creates an opportunity to have a solutions-focused conversation, instead of dwelling on the issues, and allows everyone to look towards the future.