

Avoiding workplace conflict

Learner notes

Conflict can be immensely costly to organisations, damaging to relationships and disastrous for productivity. It's a major cause of stress in the workplace - and it can lead to long-standing grievances, factionalism and absenteeism.

Whenever people work together, there's likely to be some conflict. It's natural and, in itself, it's not usually problematic. Most of the time, we rub along together and solve our differences and squabbles as they arise. In healthy groups and teams, even quite major disputes can usually be managed and settled without getting out of control. It's important to remember this - because when we're embroiled in an argument or dispute, we can often lose sight of our natural conflict resolution skills.

What is conflict?

It can help to think of conflict as something that happens in the space between two people. If you treat conflict in this way:

- Neither party should feel they are being **accused** directly
- People will be more willing to **engage** if working towards a solution, and
- They can work with **dignity and respect**, with no loss of face.

Patterns of dispute

We can look at conflict as a pattern of interactions between people. By interrupting or changing those patterns, we can alter the course of a dispute, de-escalate it and make it more manageable.

Conflict is often driven and maintained by **perceptions**: beliefs and expectations about the other person. And unless we take steps to avoid it, we can quickly get locked into a mutually destructive cycle.

Example:

Let's say, for example, that **Person A** believes that "Person B is being awkward and they've got it in for me". As they find their beliefs confirmed (person B is arguing, after all), their attitude hardens and they step up their resistant behaviour.

Meanwhile, **Person B** believes that Person A simply isn't hearing what they're trying to say. As they see this belief confirmed (Person A is becoming more resistant and

difficult), they, in turn, step up their attempts to be heard by changing their behaviour - for example, by becoming more dogmatic and speaking more loudly. Person A reciprocates, and so on... and as they get locked into this cycle, the conflict gradually escalates.

Know when to intervene

One of the first problems with conflict resolution can be knowing when to intervene. As a general rule, the earlier in the cycle a dispute is discussed, the easier it'll be to resolve. But the longer it goes on, the more hardened peoples' attitudes become - and the more difficult it is to intervene effectively. Remember, too, that the aim should be to facilitate a conversation between the disputants in dispute, NOT fix it for them. It's their disagreement, and they have to sort it out.

Separate the person from the problem

One of the basic rules for handling conflict is that it should be about resolving problems, not about attacking people. This is called 'separating the person from the problem'. Rather than attributing blame and responsibility, it's important to focus on what both parties need in order to work together more harmoniously.

Breaking the cycle

When you're locked into this kind of conflict cycle, you won't generally get the other person to calm down or change their behaviour by pushing harder. The best tactic is to change your part of the cycle - and break the pattern of ever-hardening positions.

Rather than pushing harder, try:

- **Asking questions** to better understand their position
- **Standing in their shoes** and trying to see things from their perspective
- **Listening and summarising** their position
- **Apologising** for your part in any misunderstanding
- **Expressing** your sincere wish to find a solution.

Positions vs interests

In conflict situations, people quickly take up what we call **positions**. The position is what people say the dispute is about – but a lot of the time, it's not what actually needs resolving for the conflict to be settled.

Moving beyond positions

Positions tend to be firm and difficult to negotiate. But we take positions in order to fulfill our needs or interests. For example:

- Ellie says: “I want the orange.” (that’s Ellie’s position)
- Dave replies: “I want the orange too!” (and that’s Dave’s position)

The positions people take – each wants the orange in this case – tend to be unmovable and lead to deadlock.

Enquiring about interests will help move the discussion into more fertile areas. Do this by finding out what makes someone’s position necessary for them. The idea is not to force them to defend their position, but to understand what’s important to them, from their point of view.

- One of Ellie’s interests is that she wants the orange because she’ll need a refreshing snack at netball practice this evening.
- Dave’s hobby is cooking, his interest is that he wants use the orange peel in a recipe he is planning to cook this evening.

Enquiring about interests will generally open up the conversation and move it forward, so both can have their needs met. It is easier to reconcile interests, than it is to satisfy conflicting positions.

Steps to take

1) Build an alliance

If you’re handling any kind of dispute, the thing you must focus on first is the relationship between you. In an alliance, you fight for the relationship, not against each other – and so protecting the relationship becomes the shared objective.

2) Identify interests on both sides

It’s important to work out what everyone needs to get out of the conversation. What needs to be satisfied in order for the argument to become unnecessary?

3) Listen and summarise

Obviously, you want to state your case, but listening to other person and summarising their point of view is a good way to reduce hostility and open the way to productive discussions.

4) Agree your course of action

It’s important to agree your preferred outcomes and your next actions. Discuss who’s going to do what, and how you’ll handle it if things start to go wrong again.