

Conflict At Work Practice Guide



Life at work is somewhat like life at sea: sometimes nice and calm with everything going smoothly, and then come waves, wind and dark clouds which threaten a storm. Often the storm passes and problems are dealt with, but sometimes the storm is dangerous. Storms at work can threaten our relationships, productivity and well being.

Conflict is a result of opposing interests or needs - a state of disagreement, disharmony or fighting, which causes us to think, feel and behave differently towards people and situations.

Conflict at work is more common than we realise, sometimes taking the form of a disagreement between colleagues; dealing with a customer complaint; a personality clash resulting in conflict or even an incidence of bullying, violence or dismissal. Conflict is everywhere, and if managed poorly can result in negative outcomes for the workforce and the organisation. On an individual level, conflict at work is usually stressful and unpleasant.

Can conflict be positive? Yes! In some situations, conflict can increase motivation and persistence. The outcomes of conflict, if handled constructively, are so much better for everyone; so it is worth trying to understand. If conflict is worked with creatively, it can be an opportunity for growth and change.

REFLECT

What can trigger conflict at your workplace?

When was the last time you experienced conflict at work and how did you respond? Why?



Avoiding Conflict

There are many ways to prevent conflict from becoming a real problem. Here are some good guidelines to remember when you are at work:

- 1 Respect other people's differences. We are all unique and that is okay.
- 2 Establish and respect personal and professional boundaries. Set healthy boundaries for your workload, time commitments and personal privacy.
- 3 Know what triggers your frustration and anger. Avoid these situations, people and places as much as possible.
- 4 Choose your battles. If it is a misunderstanding, one-off incident or mild offence, let it pass.
- 5 Improve your communication skills. Take responsibility for communicating well so there is no cause for misunderstanding.
- 6 Stay calm during debates and discussions. Be patient and let the other person talk first. Listen to them and they will be more interested in listening to you.
- 7 Get to know your colleagues. Be helpful, reasonable and polite. Be kind and work towards developing a positive workplace environment.
- 8 Do not engage in gossip, defamation, bullying, favouritism or any other behaviour that compromises your good character.
- 9 Smile more often. Choose a positive attitude, even when you are having a challenging or stressful day.



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Conflict Over Ideas, Decisions Or Actions

It is important to address incidents or misunderstandings because they lead to tension. This can result in poor communication and negative attitudes. Think about the following suggestions when there is conflict over ideas, decisions or actions.

- 1 Get the facts. Ask for clarification on the issue.
- 2 Analyse the situation so that you can clearly define the problem.
- 3 Aim to solve the problem, rather than 'win' the argument. Be prepared to compromise.
- 4 Use "I" statements when talking about how you feel and what you want.
- 5 Push aside feelings or judgements about the other person, and try to sincerely listen and understand their point of view.
- 6 Let people know you understand what they want and need by restating or reframing their comments or position, and checking your clarity on the issues.
- 7 Speak to people when you are calm and always consider a game plan for dealing with issues that cause conflict.
- 8 Focus on the problem, not the person. Never attack or put another person on the defensive. Focus on actions and solutions.
- 9 Map out the conflict either in your mind or on paper by finding out what people's position, needs and concerns are. Determine any common ground and the root cause of the conflict.
- 10 Evaluate your role in the conflict. Take some personal responsibility and be prepared to back away or apologise.
- 11 Resolve to do all that you can to reach a solution. This may involve taking either practical or emotional steps, such as letting go.
- 12 Ask for support or mediation when needed. Do not let unresolved conflict build up until it becomes a serious incident, breakdown or resignation.

REFLECT



What practical steps do you need to avoid or manage conflict better at work?

How can you communicate to others that you are willing to resolve a conflict?

Who do you need to resolve some conflict with, or apologise to, right now?

What communication skills are you going to improve or use more effectively at work?

What key decisions or actions will help you build better relationships with your colleagues or customers/clients? Think specifically of three.