

Turning conflicts into opportunities

Key workplace conflict resolution skills

Conflict is a normal part of any workplace relationship. After all, two people can't be expected to agree on everything all the time. Learning how to deal with conflict — rather than avoiding it — is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to a professional relationship and can be a detriment to the company and other staff as a whole. However, when handled in a respectful and positive way, conflict provides an opportunity to strengthen the bond between two employees. By learning skills for conflict resolution, you can keep your professional relationships strong and maintain a positive work environment for the entire team.

Proper conflict resolution is the responsibility of every employee and is an expected part of everyone's job. Improper conflict resolution that has a negative effect on an employee or the company will not be tolerated and is grounds for termination.

Conflict 101

- ***A conflict is more than just a disagreement.*** It is a situation in which one or both parties perceives a problem (whether or not the problem is real).
- ***Conflicts continue to fester when ignored.*** Because conflicts involve our feelings and emotions, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.
- ***We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts.*** Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs. Because these are often non-work factors, it is important to remember that everyone is coming from a different place and to remain respectful to other points of view - even if you disagree.
- ***Conflicts trigger strong emotions.*** If you aren't comfortable with your emotions or able to manage them in times of stress, you won't be able to resolve conflict successfully.
- ***Conflicts are an opportunity for growth.*** When you're able to resolve conflict in a work environment, it builds trust. You can feel secure knowing your professional relationships can survive challenges and disagreements.
- ***Conflict is often the result of missing or misconceived information.*** It is impossible to accurately judge a situation without a full understanding and appreciation of all the facts and opinions involved. No conflict is ever one-side, and rarely is any one person right and the other wrong. Misunderstanding is the major cause of most conflict.

Conflicts arise from differences, both large and small. When you can recognize conflicting needs and become willing to examine them with compassion and understanding, it opens pathways to creative problem solving, team building, and improved relationships.

Healthy and unhealthy ways of managing and resolving conflict

Unhealthy responses	Healthy responses
An inability to recognize and respond to the things that matter to the other person	The capacity to recognize and respond to the things that matter to the other person
Explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions	Calm, non-defensive, and respectful reactions
The withdrawal of an understanding attitude, resulting in rejection, isolation, and frustration	A readiness to forgive and forget, and to move past the conflict without holding resentment or anger
An inability to compromise or see the other person's side	The ability to seek compromise and avoid isolation and gossip
The fear and avoidance of conflict; the expectation of bad outcomes or no outcome	A belief that facing conflict head on is the best thing for everyone

Tips for managing and resolving conflict

Managing and resolving conflict requires the ability to quickly reduce stress and bring your emotions into balance. You can ensure that the process is as positive as possible by sticking to the following guidelines.

- **Pick your battles.** Conflicts can be draining, so it's important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy.
- **Make conflict resolution the priority, rather than "winning" or being right.** Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than winning the argument, should always be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and their viewpoint.
- **Listen for what is felt as well as said.** When we listen we connect more deeply to our own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening also strengthens us, informs us, and makes it easier for others to hear us when it's our turn to speak.
- **Focus on the present.** If you're holding on to grudges based on past resentments, your ability to see the reality of the current situation will be impaired. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the here-and-now to solve the problem.
- **Be willing to forgive.** Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.
- **Know when to let something go.** If you can't come to an agreement, sometimes it's best to agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

Remember, we're a team and should always aim to work together! However, if you are still having issues after trying to resolve a conflict, please see the employee grievance policy and take the appropriate action.