

# Conflict

## **Getting to grips with Conflict.**

Dogged by staff disagreements and petty hostilities? Psychologist and management consultant Shay McConnon describes how a series of simple steps can deal with damaging and unproductive conflicts in the workplace.

Squabbles over office space, grievances about promotion, gripes over pay – the average workplace offers numerous opportunities for conflict.

But given the complexity of human beings, it's not surprising that so much time is lost to unnecessary conflict at work.

Each of us is unique, with our own viewpoint on the world, shaped by thousands of past experiences and influenced by our varied relationships with parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and colleagues. Every employee thus brings to the workplace a mass of emotions, perspectives, opinions, needs and wants which may be very different from those of others.

## **Conflict does not make good business sense**

The resulting conflicts – whether expressed or unexpressed – can, however, be very damaging to business. A typical manager spends around 25% of his or her time dealing with conflict, so in a company with 100 managers earning an average of £40,000 each a year, that's £1 million-worth of wasted time.

The hidden costs of workplace conflict are also highly significant. An unhappy workforce - where people feel undervalued, misunderstood, overlooked or taken advantage of - leads to greater stress, increased absenteeism, low morale, poor teamwork and higher staff turnover.

Costs have to be weighed not just in human terms, but also in terms of their effect on business productivity and efficiency. Rather than being seen as a necessary evil, unwarranted conflict should therefore be regarded as an overhead, just like having a van off the road or the phone system down.

Many people would still regard conflict as inevitable, and it's true that, on the personal level, there may be individuals whose ambition, personal agenda or modus operandi will make efforts to create harmonious relationships more difficult.

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But a great deal of the conflict which takes place in the workplace, at home and in personal life can be avoided, and is born out of differences that could very easily be accommodated and resolved.

### **Avoid the “Yes, but...”**

So how could we do things better? The most common pitfall, when challenged or criticised, is to justify with a “Yes, but ...”. This is understandable. We feel hurt, misunderstood. After all we are intelligent human beings and we do things for reasons. The most natural and instinctive thing to do is to explain these reasons.

Big mistake, unless you want to break rapport or start an argument.

When you justify you are communicating win-lose. You may not have a win-lose mindset but that is what is being heard. This is likely to polarise opinions even further and to make matters worse.

Let’s take a fictional office manager, Sheila, for example, who talks to Dave, her boss. Sheila feels she’s done a good job with her presentation to the board, which was thorough and well researched. But Dave suggests that the presentation was too detailed and too long. Sheila’s immediate response is a “Yes but.” answer, a justification. “Yes, but the board needs all the data if it is to make an informed decision,” she says.

In another example, James asks his manager, Peter, for a pay rise. He’s worked long hours, and feels he’s shown commitment to the firm. But Peter’s first reaction is to explain his situation. He’d like to say yes, but sales are down and the financial situation is uncertain. James responds by saying: “That’s all very well, but I can’t make ends meet” and the gap between them grows.

Sheila’s first reaction was to justify, by explaining why she did the presentation the way she did. In similar circumstances she might also have retaliated, by saying that Dave’s presentations were often too superficial.

With James and Peter, both felt compelled to justify, without validating the other’s point of view.

But justification, retaliation and explanation are unlikely to improve understanding, or to lead to greater co-operation and collaboration.

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A much more productive, though more courageous, way forward is to first attend to the other person's needs. This doesn't mean suppressing your own point of view, or just giving in to what the other person wants. Instead it means finding out what the other person needs from you, and acknowledging that this is valid for them.

By attending to the other person as a first step, you are likely to minimise resistance, create a feeling of being listened to, and to begin to build a bridge between your differences.

In Sheila's case, she could ask Dave: "How would you want the presentation to be?" Dave will feel that Sheila is trying to understand his point of view, and that she's listening to him. Now is the moment for her to explain her situation and express her needs. In this spirit of cooperation, he'll be more receptive to taking her needs into account and to trying to find a common solution i.e. win-win.

In the conflict between Peter and James, Peter could first try to establish why James is asking for a pay rise, and why it is important to him. If he finds out that James wants a pay rise partly because he needs to feel more valued, Peter may be able to address this problem in other ways. With this approach, James is likely to feel more understood and sense a greater willingness to have his needs met, even though there is no more money on offer.

### **Ask the 'What?' question.**

A second common pitfall is to put forward our own solutions when conflict situations arise. We think we can see a way forward, and we're itching to get our opinion across. But if a friend were short sighted, would we give them our glasses, or suggest they get some tailor-made to their own eyes?

The problem with putting forward our own solutions is that they derive from our unique view of the world, and don't necessarily match the needs of others.

A better response is to invite a solution from the other. Ask the 'What?' question, so that you can move quickly from problems to solutions.

If Dave wants a shorter, more concise presentation and Sheila wants to be thorough, what would Dave suggest as a way forward so both needs are met?

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If Peter is unable to give James a pay rise at the moment, what else could he do for James to make him feel more valued?

By inviting Dave to offer a solution, Sheila is much more likely to get him on her side. He'll feel a sense of collaboration, and of productive problem solving, as well as a greater commitment to what's proposed.

If Peter invites James to suggest a way forward, there's room for further negotiation. Both sides will end up with at least some of their needs met, and will be more satisfied with the outcome. Peter might not be able to offer James a pay rise now, but he could promise to review the situation in six months time. James could suggest that being given a new area of responsibility might make him feel more valued and appreciated in the shorter term.

Workplace conflicts come in many guises, and may often seem deeply entrenched. But with minor adjustments in the language used during conflict situations and willingness from one or both parties to understand and acknowledge each other's needs, the majority of disagreements can be resolved.

The payoff is not only that managers can spend more time concentrating on the job, and that employees will feel less stressed, but also that communication will be improved and more positive, open and collaborative workplace relationships can be built.

### Conflict starters

Interrupt

Patronise

Exaggerate

Accuse, blame or demand

Use labels or put downs

Bring up the past

Use words like "You never ..." "You always ..." "You should ..."

### Resolving conflict

Attend to the other person before expressing your needs

Validate their opinion, intention and feelings

Talk about the future, not the past

Invite a solution before offering one

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Build on what is offered to accommodate both needs..

A good relationship requires mutual understanding and acceptance not always agreement.

Resolving Conflict, by Shay and Margaret McConnon, is published by How To Books, Oxford, ISBN 1-85703-994-0, £9.99. It is available from bookshops.

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