

# Managing Conflicts at Work

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**C**onflicts at work often build walls between people who are supposed to be working

together. Appropriate attention needs to be given, without which a dispute can kill a relationship. People who should be turning toward one another turn away.

It is mostly observed that individuals, teams, and whole organizations are generally pulled apart by conflict, largely due to their inability to act at all, or to a series of knee-jerk reaction that make the conflict worse. Conflict, if not resolved, has a high cost. Like pain in the human body, conflict at work is a sign that exacts immediate attention. Managers often find themselves in the middle of someone else's conflicts, which frequently gets worse if left unattended.

## Available Actions

So what choices do the managers have when conflicts occur? Most of them select from the following four broad actions available to face the conflict: fight, submit, flee, or freeze. Each action involves behavior that is usually driven by habit, an assessment of risk, and a desire for familiar outcomes.

- Managers fight to contend by either insisting or blaming, or criticizing or accusing or shouting or using direct or indirect force. This type of manager is termed as bullying manager because they try to impose their preferred solutions on the other party.
- Managers submit or yield by behaving passive having lower aspirations and settling for less than they would have liked. They either give in or give up or agree just to end conflict or surrender to what the other party wants.

- Managers might flee or withdraw by choosing to leave the scene of conflict. They might cease to talk or leave physically, cognitively and/or emotionally or change the topic.
- Managers also may freeze by choosing inaction. They appear to be weak by doing nothing or waiting for the other party's move. They may simply wait or do nothing or allow pressure to build up.

## Conflict Management Styles

Managers develop conflict management styles as shown below that affect the way conflict is perceived and handled. They are influenced by an individual's concept of the importance of personal goals and relationships with others.

**Avoiders** do see conflict as something to be feared, and often feel frustrated and hopeless when they cannot achieve their goals. During conflict they frequently give up their personal goals and cannot maintain relationships. They stay away from the issues over which the conflict is taking place and from the people they are in conflict with. For avoiders it is easier to withdraw (physically and psychologically) from a conflict internal or external, than to face it.

**Controllers** pursue their own goals at the expense of others, because relationships are of minor importance to them. They assume that conflicts are settled by one side winning and the other losing, and that they achieve a higher status by winning. Losing gives them a sense of weakness, inadequacy, and failure. They try to win by

using power over others — attacking overpowering, overwhelming, and intimidating — and will defend their position, either because they believe it is the only way forward or simply to win.

**Accommodator** type conflict management style originates from a strong need to maintain relationships. When conflict happens accommodators do not consider that their own goals are important. They want to be accepted and liked by others. They think that conflicts should be resolved quickly to create harmony, and believe that people cannot discuss conflicts without damaging relationships. They are afraid that if the conflict continues someone will get hurt and this will ruin the relationship. They give up their goals to preserve the relationship.

**Collaborators** value highly not only their own goals but also relationships. They view a conflict as a problem to be solved and a way for people to become more aware of one another's needs. They are good at seeing other people's point of view but do not forget their own goals. They are sometimes not satisfied until solutions are found and tensions and negative feelings have been resolved.

## What the Manager Should Do?

When using a mediation-style approach to disputes, it can be very useful to recognize the way the managers respond to conflict, given certain conditions, and to think

whether or not his or her conflict management style is getting him/her the right outcomes or enabling him/her to resolve conflict most effectively. They need to:

- Recognize their own pattern of behavior and under what circumstance they might adopt a particular conflict management style.
- Understanding how this might influence their management style.
- Know what alternative strategies are available.
- Develop a variety of skills so that they can adopt the right way to respond to conflict.
- Match his/her strategy to the situation.

## Why is Conflict so Rampant at Work?

Managers might expect that colleagues in an organization would tend to pull together and work as a team. Most managers see themselves as struggling to do a difficult job, juggling many different professional and personal demands, with all too little acknowledgment of their skills and the important role they play. Some managers cope by taking a chosen line.

Three types of organizational culture persist that lead to high levels of stress arising out of visible or hidden conflict:

- ▶ Extremely competitive win/lose culture — in which people strive against their colleagues rather than with them.
- ▶ Manager-blaming culture — in which people are frightened to step out of line.
- ▶ Sacrifice and overwork culture — in which people get involved by putting their jobs

and their work above their personal wellbeing, to the extent that they become ill.

**The Cost of Conflict**

If some of the above cultures exist in his/her workplace, managers should look out – conflict at the workplace can be extremely costly.

The following are the seven main ways in which conflict can cost organizations' time, money, and human resources:

1. Formal or legal dispute resolution – formal grievance procedures, labour courts or litigation are all expensive, generally slow, and often disastrous to relationships. Justice needs to be done, but the most formal route is often justice at a very high cost.
2. Individual competencies get waned – people work less effectively when they are in conflict with colleagues. Negative conflicts push people's tolerance to the margins. They are less likely to cope under pressure and to meet their own personal and professional targets. They are also more likely to make significant errors. Managers "stuck in the middle" often become worried and are less inclined to plan ahead. They remain with what they know and play in safe.
3. Ineffective working relationship – a very wide variety of managers, team leaders, and workers are there in the organizations who are disoriented, distressed, and disconnected from their colleagues by conflict. They have not been working to their own fullest potential, nor have they been working well with others.
4. Toxic communication – in prolonged one-to-one disputes the people directly involved communicate



badly and find it almost impossible to work together. This spills over to peers and bosses. Assumption and ambiguity, gossip and rumor proliferate and people either take sides or stop communicating in an effort to avoid the poison.

5. Impaired staff and team development – retention becomes difficult when people are involved in damaging interpersonal conflicts. Some people exit psychologically or emotionally; others sign off sick or leave, since they can no longer manage. Replacing these people temporarily or permanently is time consuming and costly. Teams experiencing negative conflict often find it extremely difficult to move beyond that frustrating stage when no one is working well, decisions take an age, and people feel as though they are walking through glue.
6. It's everywhere feelings – the workplace changes from being a "desert of emotion" where nobody speaks about feelings to a highly charged environment where feelings rain in from all directions. People personalize issues and blame is rampant. Every conversation becomes charged with emotion and simple decisions take hours because of the level of argument they provoke. People's negative feelings about themselves and about

others undermine morale and output is reduced.

7. Tarnished image – conflicts that become public affect customers', clients', and shareholders' trust and take the shine off the organization's reputation.

**The Positive Potential of Conflict:**

With regard to negative experience of conflict it is important to:

- ▶ Learn from them.
- ▶ Recognize that human conflict is difficult and not be too hard on ourselves if we do not manage it too well.
- ▶ Ensure that we are not weighed down by simplistic notions of success or failure.
- ▶ View conflicts as an opportunity rather than a burden to be borne or a hurdle to be overcome.

There is a great deal of energy in conflict. People spend a large amount of their time fueling the fire, seeking allies, talking it over with colleagues at the coffee machine (again, and again, and again). Given the pressures that managers are under, any energy flying around the workplace needs to be harvested and harnessed to good effect, not avoided or squashed. Managing conflict well is not about stopping it or dampening it down, it is about working to turn the energy from being put into a negative outcome to a positive outcome instead.

So what potentially positive aspects does conflict offer? Many factors can make it difficult for managers to see the positive potential in conflict:

- The weight of previous experiences of negative conflict
- Lack of confidence in their own skills
- Lack of confidence in other

people's ability to respond constructively to conflict.

- Fear conflict
- Cultural and social pressures (corporate culture) that encourage negative conflict

**Positive Aspects of Conflict**

- Bringing issues into the open
- Leading to resolution
- Being a driver of change
- Building understanding of differences
- Dissipating anger
- Raising awareness of other people's needs
- Creating a focus on common goals
- Unifying, bonding, and having a positive impact on team spirit.
- Leading to healthy dialogue
- Motivating people to raise issues and discuss new ideas
- Challenging existing inadequacies and shortcomings of systems
- Leading to review and reassessment of situations and organizations

**Staying Positive about Conflict**

Conflicts will happen and managers will have to face those no matter whether they like it at all or not. But instead of simply getting swayed with the negatives only, they will have to make the best use of situations they face day in and day out. In order to hold on to positive potential of conflict managers will need to:

- ▶ Expand their repertoire of conflict management skills.
- ▶ Pay attention to positive moments and hang on to them like gold.
- ▶ Encourage others to feel more positive about conflict.
- ▶ Learn how to use a mediation-style structured approach designed to resolve conflicts early and fully. □

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