How to manage a conflict

Unless you're a hermit living on a mountaintop, you experience conflict at work from time to time. And, if you're like most people, you'd rather avoid it than address it. But if you let a conflict fester, it can do real damage to your well-being and your ability to do your job — especially if you have to work closely with the other person involved.

Instead, try these steps to ease friction, clarify expectations, and even strengthen the relationship.

1. Reframe the conflict as an opportunity to improve the situation.

Conflicts tend to breed negativity: Resentment gnaws at you, problems seem intractable, and relationships can feel downright broken.

But if you're able to shift your perspective away from failure and toward what you stand to gain from resolving the issue, you can open yourself up to taking steps to get there. Addressing the issue can help you and the other person better understand and communicate with each other — or at least figure out how to get along well enough to do your jobs.

To help you make the shift, ask yourself questions like:

- *How would resolving or at least making progress on the conflict improve my work life? My productivity?*
- *How would my attitude toward work change if I had a more positive relationship with the other person?*
- *How might the other person benefit from addressing the conflict, too?*

2. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Especially if the conflict has been brewing for a while, you've probably made assumptions about the other person. The cycle goes like this: The person replies to your question with a two-word answer. You feel slighted, so you conclude that they're rude or dismissive of your needs, rather than in a rush or unaware of how they come across. And with each curt response, you become more convinced that your view is right. But the other person is probably not trying to make life hard for you — they're just trying to do their job and progress in their career.

To interrupt the vicious cycle:

- **Focus on the issue at hand without generalizing or making it personal.** For example, rather than thinking *They never bother to help* or *They're lazy/mean/careless*, the issue is that you need more information in the responses you get from them.

- **Challenge your assumptions about the person**. What are other possible explanations for their behavior? Maybe their priorities compete with yours, they're going through a stressful time, or they're so passionate about an issue that they're oblivious to other perspectives. Keep alternatives like these in mind so that you can approach them with curiosity and empathy.

For more, see 6 questions to help you address workplace friction productively.

3. Explore any underlying issues driving the conflict.

Sometimes, a conflict isn't so straightforward — or it's devolved into petty slights and you've lost sight of what's really going on. On the surface, you may be fighting with a co-worker over a negative email exchange, but is that the real root of the problem? If you can find the source, you stand a better chance of not just fixing one snippy message, but finding a longer-term solution.

To better understand what's driving the conflict, investigate any underlying causes you can find. For example, if your co-worker appears dismissive of your requests or looks skeptical when you present ideas, could the underlying issue be:

- Mismatched communication styles?
- Unclear expectations?
- Lack of trust?

Consider going a step further by trying to learn how the other person feels. The next time the conflict crops up, notice what the other person says and how they react and try to name it — are they angry, defensive, confused, overwhelmed, or something else? If you feel comfortable doing so, you could also ask them how they feel about your recent interactions.

Identifying what starts and promotes the conflict can help you articulate what you're not getting from the relationship, figure out how to approach the other person, and see what you and they can do to make the situation better.

4. Plan how you'll raise the issue with the other person.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is bring up the issue. When you raise your concern, will they get angry, defensive, judgmental, or completely shut down and sink your chances of finding a resolution? Maybe, but maybe not — especially if you approach them in a way that's honest but not accusatory. Making a plan can help the conversation feel a lot less intimidating.

Set the stage for the conversation to give the other person an idea of what you want to talk about and time to think over the issue. Depending on the situation, you could try an approach that's:

- **Curious:** *"I'm interested in how you think communication is going on project X. Could we find some time to discuss that this week?"*
- **Direct:** *"I've found it challenging to write up my reports on project X without more information from you. I'd like to talk about how to improve our communication so it works well for both of us. Could I schedule some time with you this week to discuss this?"*
- **Optimistic:** *"I think we might have different perspectives on how best to communicate about project X. But I'm confident that we can find a way that works for both of us. Do you have a few minutes to talk this through this week?"*

Don't spend too much time trying to find the perfect words. The most important thing is to get started. And schedule the discussion for when you both have the privacy, time, and mental space to talk through the issue — when neither of you is too busy or stressed.

For more, see 23 phrases to help you navigate emotionally charged conversations.

Hear how manager Grayson Morris mustered the courage to raise the issue with a higher-up who was repeatedly rude to him — and how doing so ultimately improved their relationship.

5. Clearly explain your needs to the other person.

How can the person meet your needs if they don't know what they are — or why you need something done?

Explain your perspective using "I" statements (e.g., *"In order to plan the next phase of the project, I need complete answers to my questions"* or *"I want to be able to share my ideas in meetings without being interrupted").* This framing helps you avoid sounding accusatory — and leaves room for options for how the other person can contribute to the solution. For example, maybe your colleague struggles to write detailed email responses during a chaotic workday, but they do have time for a 20-minute weekly update call.

Also share why you want your desired outcome — ideally including how that outcome will benefit the other person, too — so they see what you're aiming for and why it's worth their time to help (e.g., *"The sooner we can start on the next phase of the project, the sooner we can finish it and start working on your team's next release"* or *"If everyone has a chance to share their ideas, our team can find better solutions to customer issues"*).

6. Ask what the other person needs — and assess what you can do to improve the situation.

You might feel like all the blame lies with the other person, but most conflicts are a two-person tango: You're likely doing something to escalate tensions — or at least there are steps you could take to ease them.

So, use this opportunity to ask questions like, *"I'd love to hear your perspective. How are things going for you?"* Be prepared for "hot" emotional reactions or "cool" one-word responses (like "Fine"). Regardless, ask follow-up questions to make sure you understand their needs and priorities and prompt them for deeper insights (e.g., *"Could you say more about that?"*) or check for understanding (e.g., *"It sounds like you're frustrated with the volume of questions I send. Is that a fair assessment?"*).

Use what you hear and consider how your own behavior and attitude have contributed to the situation to determine what you can do to help. Suggest to the other person the possible changes you can make or just decide to do them yourself. Regardless, communicate what you'll be trying in order to keep them informed and to show that you're making a good-faith effort.

7. Make use of cooling-off periods to calm down and consider different approaches.

If things get heated in your conversation, don't push yourself or them too far — flared tempers make it harder to think rationally and easier to say things you'll regret.

Instead, ask for a break and suggest another time to revisit the issue: *"This is clearly an important issue. I could use some time to think about what we've discussed. Could we take a break now and schedule time tomorrow to revisit this?"*

Doing so will give you both time to mentally regroup and think about what to say next or to choose a new tactic to try if your current approach isn't working. For example, if talking through the issue isn't helping both of you to find common ground, you could suggest writing out your thoughts instead. Or, if you keep butting heads, you could ask a trusted mentor how they've dealt with similar situations in the past or for ideas of what to try next.

8. Consistently check in with the other person to celebrate progress — or course-correct as needed.

People often want to distance themselves from those they disagree with. But thoughtful, consistent communication is like a balm — it can soothe and heal over time and even prevent future flare-ups. And it shows the other person that you're committed to keeping them informed and to building trust.

When you notice progress or areas of agreement, proactively share your observations and gratitude (e.g., *"We've discussed how we each want to be updated, which is a great start"* or *"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my ideas in last week's team meeting"*).

And if you're not making headway, try an alternate approach you identified (see No. 7), and let the other person know that you're changing tactics. Resolving conflict and restoring a relationship takes time, so you probably won't solve a deep-seated issue in one try. Instead,

stay focused on making progress and building momentum.

In This Week's Newsletter

"OK, don't correct me if I'm wrong, but…"

Should you be stepping up — not back — when dealing with your manager?

Topic: <u>Managing Up</u>
Your boss is in charge. But that doesn't necessarily mean they want you to melt into the background.

"I could go on and on about this. And I will.
Get comfortable."

When creating a presentation, start by developing a two-minute message

Topic: <u>Giving Presentations</u>
Getting stuck in the details is an easy and common way to lose your audience's attention. This trick helps you stay focused on your key points.