

# Chapter 1

## An Overview of Conflict Resolution at Work

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Looking at causes of workplace conflict
  - ▶ Using a mediation process to help employees through problems
  - ▶ Finding and using conflict expertise
  - ▶ Managing a conflict between you and another person
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**Y**ou may love your family and friends, but truth be told, you spend much of your time with the people at work. Not getting along with co-workers, or having members of your team at odds with one another can be stressful and distracting. In addition, problems in the workplace rarely stay at work; they can permeate every aspect of your life. So it behooves you to take the time to understand what's behind a conflict, to get beyond the surface issues, and to work to find satisfying resolutions for everyone involved.

Being curious about how to resolve conflict means you're probably ready to try something different. And being open to trying something different means you have a good shot at getting closure. Settling differences effectively requires you to step back and look at the broader picture, be mindful of another person's point of view, and take into account peripheral factors that may be creating or provoking problems, like group dynamics or workplace norms.

In this chapter, I give you an overview of conflict resolution so you can successfully mediate problems in your workplace, whether those problems are between two individuals or within a larger group. I also tell you about additional conflict resolution resources you may have at your disposal. Finally, I tell you how to adapt your newfound conflict resolution knowledge to situations that hit a little closer to home — when you're directly involved in the conflict.

## *Considering Common Contributors to Conflict*

As much as you may think of yourself as a unique individual and see your problems as complex and one-of-a-kind, you actually have a lot in common with your colleagues when it comes to how conflicts get started and why problems escalate into unbearable situations. For the most part, workplace difficulties fall into common categories, such as

- ✓ Communication (and miscommunication)
- ✓ Employee attitudes
- ✓ Honesty
- ✓ Insubordination
- ✓ Treatment of others
- ✓ Work habits

Although most conflicts fall into these common categories, the company or organization you work for has unique DNA. The combination of its employees, policies, and culture has the potential to either create the most productive working environment you can imagine or ignite some of the most traumatic problems you've encountered in your career. Whether it's the former, the latter, or somewhere in between depends on how employees — and especially you, if you're a manager — handle conflict.

Effectively addressing conflict takes into account the obvious surface issue, the emotional climate surrounding the topic, and your knowledge of the viewpoints of the people involved in the dispute. In this section, I provide insight into how differing perspectives can cause employees to feel like ships passing in the night. I also discuss emotions, touch on the importance of communication in your organization, and look at group dynamics, including your role in the group.

### *Acknowledging differing perspectives*

You and each of the employees on your team have a lens through which you see the world and one another. Everything you see, hear, and say goes through your filter on the way in *and* on the way out. These filters determine how you present and receive information. They color, distort, or amplify information in both positive and negative ways and act much like personal interpreters in every situation.

Your individual kaleidoscope is shaped by things like your personal history, education, values, culture, and the roles you play in your life, both at work and at home. Everything you consider important works together to create your worldview. The same is true for your co-workers. An employee who comes from the school of hard knocks may very well have a different perspective about educational opportunities in the workplace than a colleague who graduated top in his class from an Ivy League school.



When I discuss values, I'm not talking about tangible assets like your car, your house, or your diamond jewelry. Rather, *values* in this context are things like safety, respect, autonomy, and recognition.

Being familiar with your employees' values helps you resolve conflicts. For example, say that two employees are having an argument over where to stack some vendor binders. If you can appreciate that one employee sees respect as paramount in his environment, and his workspace is encroached by his colleague with a lackadaisical attitude toward boundaries, you have a better chance of helping the two resolve the issue. Rather than swooping in to tell the pair that the vendor notebooks they're arguing about should go on a shelf, you can facilitate a conversation about the real issue — respect. After you address the issue of respect, where the binders should go will be relatively easy to decide.

In Chapter 2, I go into more detail about filters, values, and the emotions individuals bring to conflict.

## *Recognizing emotions in others*

Most organizations embrace positive emotions. The excitement over landing the big account, the revelry celebrating the product launch, or the congratulatory slaps on the back as the ribbon is cut for the newly completed project are all ways employees acknowledge optimistic emotions. Where managers often falter is in failing to recognize that every emotion — from upbeat to angry — is a clue to discovering people's personal values. Positive emotions are a sign that values are being met, while negative ones suggest that some work still needs to be done!

It's obvious that a situation has turned emotional when tears flow or an employee ratchets up the volume when he speaks, to the point that the entire office slips into an uncomfortable silence. What's a little more difficult is knowing what to do with such passionate responses. Emotional reactions are often seen as negative behavior in just about any workplace, but if you spend some time investigating and interpreting them, you can get a leg up on how to resolve the trouble. Check out Chapter 2 for a complete discussion of emotions at work.

## *Handling communication mishaps*

Communication makes the world go 'round, and the same is true for you and your employees. Word choice, tone of voice, and body language all contribute to whether or not you understand each other.

Using vague or confusing language causes communication misfires. Phrases such as “when you get a chance,” “several,” or “sometimes” don’t accurately state what you really mean. Similarly, words like “always” and “never” can get you in trouble. Choosing your words wisely, and in a way that invites dialogue, makes for a less stressful work environment and models good communication. See Chapter 2 for more tips on communicating effectively.

## *Deciphering group dynamics*

Two employees can completely understand each other and work like a well-oiled machine. Then a third co-worker joins the team, and now you have group dynamics in play. Wow, that changes everything! A team that’s cohesive and meeting its goals can be exhilarating from management’s perspective. But if cliques form and co-workers start looking for allies to enlist in power plays behind closed doors, communication breaks down.

Teams have a propensity to label members — the caretaker, the go-to guy, the historian, and so on. It’s good to know who’s who in a group, but the responsibilities that come with those labels may be impossible (or undesirable) to live up to. Employees start to make assumptions based on the labeled roles, such as assuming that the go-to guy will happily accept any assignment you give him. Conjecture based on limited or selective information causes miscommunication, misunderstandings, and ultimately, conflict.

To address what happens when members of a group are undergoing difficulties, investigate how and when the problem started and determine if the problem stems from just a few staff members or if the impact is so great that you need to tackle the problem with the entire team. And flip to Chapter 3 for more information on the way group dynamics can contribute to conflict.

## *Assessing your own role*

Something you’re either doing or *not* doing may be causing friction on your team, and you may not even know what it is. Most people in conflict tend to spend more time thinking about what the other person is doing than looking at their own behavior and attitudes toward the difficulty.

Chapter 4 outlines some of the common missteps that managers make in their attempts to handle problems at work. I discuss ways you may be unwittingly pitting team members against each other, address the dreaded micro-managing accusation, and explain how underrepresenting your team to the higher-ups may unite them in a way that puts you at the center of a storm.

## *Mediating like a Pro*

You can settle conflict in a variety of ways, including the following:

- ✓ **Judging (or arbitrating):** Hear what each party has to say and then decide who's right and who's wrong.
- ✓ **Counseling:** Listen with an empathetic ear with no expectation on your part for immediate action.
- ✓ **Negotiation:** Go back and forth between the employees while each suggests solutions until they land on something as a compromise that may not truly satisfy either person.
- ✓ **Mediation:** Monitor and guide a conversation between the two as they work toward understanding each other and creating solutions that work for both.

When I meet with clients in conflict, I prefer to use a tried-and-true mediation process that looks at both the surface issues and the underlying causes for the difficulty. In this section, I show you why mediation is your best bet for a long-term solution and improved working relationship.

## *Following eight steps to a resolution*

Using a solid process to mediate a meeting between co-workers in conflict gives you a foundation on which to manage and monitor the difficulty. Follow these steps from a professional mediation process:

1. **Do preliminary planning and setup:** Carefully investigate who's involved and what you believe the issues are, and invite the parties to discuss the matter with you. Provide a private, comfortable, and confidential environment for the meeting.
2. **Greet and discuss the process:** Explain your role as a neutral facilitator, and go over the ground rules, including your expectation for open minds and common courtesy.

3. **Share perspectives:** Give each person an opportunity to share his point of view and discuss the impact the conflict has had on him. Reflect, reframe, and neutralize emotional content while honoring the spirit of what he's sharing.
4. **Build an agenda:** Allow both parties to create a list of topics (not solutions) they want to discuss. The list acts as a road map that keeps the discussion on track.
5. **Negotiate in good faith:** As co-workers discuss initial ideas for solutions, set the tone by listening to any and all ideas. Brainstorm and play out how suggestions might work and whether they satisfy what's most important to the employees.
6. **Hold private meetings as necessary:** If parties are at an impasse, meet separately with each to confidentially explore what's keeping each from moving forward. Discuss what each is willing to do (or ask for) in the spirit of progress and real resolution.
7. **Craft agreements:** Bring employees back together and let them share, if they so choose, any discoveries they made during the private meeting sessions. Begin to narrow down solutions and come to an agreement (with details!) on who will do what and when.
8. **Monitor follow-through:** Keep track of progress, address hiccups, and refine as appropriate.

## *Facilitating a conversation between two people*

Before you begin the mediation process, you need to consider the following:

- ✓ **A suitable meeting space:** You want the employees to feel comfortable enough in the meeting location to open up about the real issues. Meet in a place that has lots of privacy — like an out-of-the-way conference room — and avoid any chance of turf wars by making sure the location is viewed as neutral territory.
- ✓ **Confidentiality:** You need to build trust for a mediation conversation (see Chapter 6 for details on setting up a meeting), so agreeing to keep the conversation between the colleagues is a must, whether you act as mediator or bring in an outside expert.
- ✓ **Time and interruptions:** You probably want to set aside at least four hours to work through the issues, and you want to clear your schedule of other responsibilities so that the meeting isn't interrupted.



When you make the decision to mediate a conversation between feuding parties, a few things change for you. It's imperative that you walk a fine line between manager and mediator. As a manager, you have the power to make decisions; as a mediator, you have the power to put the onus on the employees and act as a neutral third party (who just happens to be coming to the table with a skill set that the co-workers have yet to develop).

Practicing the arts of reflecting and reframing an employee's point of view may be an initial challenge for you, but it's worth it in the end. The employee will appreciate your efforts to respond to his emotions, your accurate descriptions of what's most important to him, and your empathetic recognition of what impact the conflict has had on him. And both parties will benefit from you listening to understand their perspective because they'll hear each other's story in a new way. Chapter 7 walks you through these steps and helps you keep your footing along the path of conflict resolution.

Negotiating a resolution to conflict starts with getting all the relevant information about the past on the table and ends with a clear definition of what the future could be. Get there by listening for what's really important to the parties involved and then asking directed, open-ended questions. In Chapter 8, I provide questions and cover the process of moving people through the negotiation stage of a mediated conversation.

The best solutions satisfy all parties involved and, perhaps more important, are lasting. Putting a bandage on a gaping wound stops the bleeding for a few seconds, but stitches will help it heal permanently. So it is with finding a solution to a conflict; it's much more rewarding in the long run not to have to address the same problems over and over. Be open to letting your employees try solutions for a while as you monitor the situation from a measured distance, and have them come back to the table, if necessary, until they reach a lasting agreement. Chapter 9 helps you work with your employees to develop good solutions and agreements. Chapter 11 gives you the tools you need to successfully monitor those agreements.

## *Managing conflict with a team*

If the conflict making its way through your organization seems to affect each and every employee in your organization, planning for and facilitating a team meeting may be the answer.



The more upfront preparation you do, the better your odds are for a fruitful outcome, so set yourself up for success by following a few simple tips:

- ✓ Decide whether you're neutral enough to facilitate the conversation. If not, look to a professional mediator or conflict resolution specialist to help.
- ✓ Consider broad details like your goals and how you'll develop milestones that quantify progress.
- ✓ Plan for smaller details, like exactly how you'll organize small group work and handle hecklers.

In Chapter 10, I discuss how to resolve conflict when larger groups are involved.



Following up and monitoring the situation takes some attention on your part. Look for signs of decreased tension and increases in work quality and quantity so that you can get out of the hall monitor role and back into the position of managing the business you were hired to direct. Check out Chapter 11 for tips on following up and monitoring the progress your team is making.

## ***Tapping into Conflict Resolution Expertise***

You don't have to go it alone when difficulties evolve to the point that some sort of action is clearly necessary. And you don't need to panic or jump in and attack the situation without first looking at the tools available to you. Create a customized approach to fit your unique circumstances by looking at what's already in place and then determining how to augment that with a little help from your friends. If you find yourself working to mentor an employee through conflict, offer him training and educational opportunities, and always leave the door open for customizing what's right for him.

While you're doing that, keep your team focused on the work at hand by following the advice I give in Chapter 12.

### ***Internal resources***

Human Resources is an obvious place to start when you begin your search for advice and insight about a conflict. These personnel professionals can help you investigate an employee's work history and interpret company



policy or employment law. They often lend a hand with customized trainings and can identify employee assistance programs such as counseling and addiction specialists.



They can also point you to other entities that may be able to help, including

- ✓ **Shared neutrals:** Common in large organizations and government agencies, shared neutrals are individuals selected from different departments with various levels of authority. They're trained in mediation and are brought together to purposely create a diverse group perspective.
- ✓ **The ombudsman:** An ombudsman is an employee in a company who provides a safe place to talk, vent, explore ideas, troubleshoot, or brainstorm any workplace topic.
- ✓ **Unions:** If your company has a relationship with a union, you can always tap into its strength and problem-solving expertise.

Flip to Chapter 13 for more about these and other internal resources you can utilize in a conflict.

## *External resources*

The cost of doing nothing can far outweigh the budgetary impact of hiring an expert, but looking for the right entity to help can be overwhelming. Check credentials as you consider trainers, conflict coaches, and mediators to help with ongoing problems. Local dispute resolution centers, mediation associations, and professional training organizations can help you find experts in your area (see Chapter 14 for details about each).



Consider turning to an external specialist when

- ✓ The conflict is beyond your current abilities or the scope of internal resources.
- ✓ You're unable to stay neutral or unable to be seen as neutral.
- ✓ You can't guarantee confidentiality or would like to offer an added layer of privacy.
- ✓ It's important to you to create a personal or professional boundary.
- ✓ You want to communicate the seriousness of the matter.
- ✓ You want to participate in the process so you'd like someone else to take the lead.

## *Dealing with a Direct Conflict*

Having difficulty with someone you work with can weigh heavily on you. Conflict isn't fun, even if you've somewhat enjoyed plotting the next move that will surely crush your opponent. Conflict takes a lot of energy, and when it gets to the point that uninvolved co-workers start directing attention toward you and your problems, or the work around you is affected, it's time to keep your reputation intact and figure things out.

Chances are that you're ready to resolve your differences and create a little peace and quiet. Take into account the unique characteristics that each of your working relationships has, but take care to treat everyone (subordinate, peer, and superior) with the utmost respect to avoid meeting that person again in what could be a horribly uncomfortable situation (like in the interview for a big promotion a year from now!). Knowing how to adapt your approach based on your co-worker's position on the org chart can make the difference between making matters worse and keeping your dignity in what may otherwise be an unbecoming situation. Staying true to yourself while you make room for a colleague's perspective is not only possible — it's necessary. (See Chapter 18 for details on how to tailor your approach to the org chart.)

## *Finding solutions that work for both of you*

When you think about addressing a conflict, ask yourself, "What's motivating me to have this conversation?" If your answer is that you want to shame or threaten the other person, then the skills I share with you in this book won't do you any good. Being tricky to get your way and leave the other person in the dust doesn't really resolve conflict; it may hold it off for a while, but it's safe to say that the person you see as your opponent will find another opportunity to fight back.

How do you figure out what both people in a conflict want? You start by identifying core values. What do you *think* the other person wants when he says, "Don't touch anything on my desk ever again!"? Does he want you to leave his workspace alone, or do you think his emotional reaction indicates that he values respect? Perhaps from his perspective, co-workers show one another respect by asking permission before taking the stack of reports he's working on. And therein lies the real issue for him.

Figure out what you value (what's most important to you). Practice ways to communicate that information to your co-worker, and then create a productive meeting in which both of you share what's important. Be sure to reflect

and restate what you hear him say is important to him, neutralize the emotions you see or hear, and get to work on coming up with solutions that fit the whole problem, not just your side.



If you're not sure what either or both of you really want, head to Chapter 15, where I help you look at both sides of the conflict. After you have an idea of what each side wants, ask your co-worker to meet with you (I tell you the best way to do this in Chapter 16). When you're ready to sit down to discuss the conflict, be sure to heed the advice I give in Chapter 17.



Look for ways to solve difficulties that give you both what you want. And if you really need to feel like you've won, consider the idea that including your co-worker in the solution expands the win rather than cancels it out.

## *Creating a different future*

Use a different tactic when you start a conversation with a colleague or your boss to avoid some of the stale arguments you've been having. Taking a new approach is the first step in setting the stage for what happens next. Having the same old discussion over and over (and over!) may be a sign that one or both of you aren't really taking the level of responsibility needed in order to move on. If self-assessment isn't your strong suit, don't be afraid to ask for help.

### **Making an effective apology**

In my experience, the right apology at the right time can significantly change a working relationship, even if it appears to be irrevocably broken. Your co-worker can get past the differences quicker and with more grace if you're able to acknowledge what you've done to contribute to the conflict. By giving a sincere apology, you eliminate the risk that he'll hold you hostage for a wrongdoing. Admit it and move on!

If you really feel that you've been a victim and can't see where you may have contributed to the tension, don't make something up just to have something to apologize for. Less obvious contributors to the conflict may be the tone you've taken, whether you've been avoiding

him, or perhaps the fact that you didn't speak up sooner. Contemplate those and others that may come to mind before deciding an apology isn't necessary.

Genuine apologies, in my opinion, are more than saying, "I'm sorry." They include a description of what you're sorry for, an assurance that it won't happen again, and a request for an opportunity to make it up to the injured party. Your regret may model for your counterpart the apology you'd like to hear as well! Your statement should go something like this: "I'm sorry I waited to share the information with you. From here on out, I'll be sure to let you know about my findings as soon as I receive the data. What can I do to make up for my hesitation?"

Consider the strengths each of you bring to the workplace, and capitalize on those to move your relationship forward. The employee who nitpicks your daily reports may be the very person who saves you from embarrassing yourself with faulty data in front of the execs. Step back and consider that someone, somewhere thinks this person is an asset to the organization and that how you handle this situation makes a difference to that someone. Put effort into taking steps to building a new relationship and a more cohesive future. Be seen as a leader rather than someone who enjoys kicking up the dust.

Find the common ground you share (and you do have some!). At the very least, the two of you probably agree there's a problem, that you'd like it to end, and that you both most likely want the working conditions to get better. Outside of that, perhaps you and your colleague would like a process improved, want to find ways to foster teamwork, or want to make sure your reputations aren't tarnished by your not-so-private difficulties. How you've both gone about trying to achieve those goals, though, may be at the center of your conflict. Finding and examining common ground helps you both own the problem *and* the solution. Flip to Chapter 17 for tips on how to find common ground and negotiate resolutions with a colleague.