

Resolving workplace conflict: 8 simple, smart strategies

by Kathy Perkins

Many lawsuits result from relatively small, manageable disputes that weren't dealt with directly, often because HR simply didn't know what to do or feared making it worse.

Here are my favorite strategies for dealing with disruptive conflict, based on the book *Resolving Conflicts at Work* by Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith.

1. Culture shock: Change the culture and context of conflict. Step back, reflect on recurring issues and see if you can change employees' expectations about how their issues will be addressed. *Example:* A manufacturing plant increased productivity and reduced claims by adopting a Japanese model of rewarding employee input rather than labeling comments as "complaints."

2. Shut up and listen: Listen actively, empathetically and responsively. Organizations typically manage by telling people how to behave. Instead, try asking questions and then listening to the answers. You'll get useful information and employees will feel respected.

3. Let it out: Acknowledge and integrate emotions to solve problems. The unwritten rule that emotions have no place at work is neither realistic nor helpful. "Good" emotions, such as enthusiasm, are expected and rewarded, while "bad" emotions such as anger are labeled irrational. But to the person in conflict, his or her emotions are logical. Discussing and expressing emotions in a safe environment can lift barriers to a more effective working relationship.

4. Buried treasure: Search beneath the surface for hidden meaning. It's a surprise when someone blows up over something small. Disruptive behavior is like the tip of an iceberg with hidden fears, desires and intentions that help explain what's really wrong.

5. Tune it out. Separate what matters from what gets in the way. At some point the debate over who was right and who was wrong does no more good. I love this advice: Give up all hopes of having a better past. Move past unproductive dialogues by presenting a challenge for those in conflict to work together.

6. Codependent no more. Stop rewarding and learn from difficult behaviors. I recently defended a retaliation lawsuit brought by the plant bully. Discipline did nothing. When he was fired for chest bumping a co-worker, he was shocked. Could the lawsuit have been avoided with a different approach? The bully derived satisfaction from negative attention. Providing positive attention for acceptable behavior might have been more effective.

7. Work it out. Solve problems creatively, plan strategically and negotiate collaboratively. We have a tendency to deal with conflict by separating people. That may be necessary with a harassment complaint. But there may be a better way. Can you get them to work together? People do better when there are clear goals that make sense to them.

8. Let them vent. Design systems for prevention and resolution. Organizations may want to institutionalize a dispute resolution system to resolve conflict with assistance. I've seen fewer discrimination lawsuits against unionized employers with a strong grievance process. Union-free employers can benefit from customizing a comparable program.

The bottom line: Take proactive steps to turn unproductive [workplace conflict](#) into positive forward-looking energy.

Author: Kathy Perkins counsels employers on employment law and mediates workplace disputes and employment lawsuits. Contact Kathy Perkins LLC Workplace Law & Mediation in Lawrence, Kan., at kathy@kathy-perkins.com.