

Types of workplace conflict and how to handle them



There are many types of workplace conflict, and unfortunately, conflict is inevitable in one way or another. Bringing many different people together in the same place working towards the same goal can produce incredible results, but it can also create opportunities for misunderstands, miscommunication, and sometimes just simple disagreement. Ultimately, not everyone has to be best friends at work, but they do need to get along well enough to get the job done.

If you're facing conflict in the workplace, it's important to first identify the type and root of the conflict. From there, it needs to be addressed in an appropriate manner before it can grow and start creating larger-scale conflict.

Logistical conflict

Not all conflict stems from people simply not getting along. Sometimes there are processes and logistical matters that can get in the way and create conflict between employees, departments, and more.

Work environment

All you bosses out there need to make sure your employees are working in an environment that is conducive to their productivity. A cluttered or inefficient work environment can make it difficult to find necessary documents

and also negatively impact the mood of employees. Fortunately, this is often an easy fix.

One good way to clean up a work environment is by placing a square of painter's tape on any object that hasn't been used in the past week/month. After you have placed all the stickers, step back and evaluate how many unused and excess objects exist in your work area. An alternative is to tape just about *everything* in a workspace and then remove the tape as the item is used. Encourage employees to do this and then to consider removing any items in the work area that aren't being used and probably won't be needed.

Speaking of work environments, there is nothing worse than bad working conditions for employees. Sadly, even first-world countries have jobs that don't provide the safest and ideal working conditions. Consider asking employees about their work environment. If employees sit at desks all day, are their chairs comfortable and ergonomic? If they're in a call center environment, are their headphones adequately noise-canceling? Is the break room at the far end of the building, meaning that they spend most of their break time just walking back and forth?

Many of these things can tank employee satisfaction but would be simple to fix. All you have to do is ask.

Taking breaks

Taking breaks is an essential part of the workday. Companies that don't allow employees sufficient time to recharge *most definitely* deal with more problems in the workplace because of exhaustion and frustration. Employees should have adequate time to take breaks and policies that support it. A break isn't a huge benefit if, for example, they're constantly expected to answer questions and face interruptions.

Read the U.S. Department Of Labor's [guidelines](#) for staying legal when it comes to letting employees take breaks.

Interdependence

Some employees depend on other employees to make their money or fulfill their work tasks.

For example, a member of the sales team at a car dealership might want to sell a car that needs a quick repair, and they may need the automotive tech in the shop to switch out a part — this is an example of interdependence. If the auto tech is busy working on a different car, then the salesmen might start to create conflicts within the workplace by complaining to other salesmen and management.

This is an important source of conflict to recognize because these often point to inefficiencies and places for process improvement. If your organization's workflow is set up in a way that work interdependencies are creating conflict between employees, then there's likely an opportunity to improve those processes. Be sure to look at the root of this conflict and how it can be addressed.

Employee turnover

If you've ever worked in a business that cycles through employees, then you know how frustrating employee turnover can be. In fact, some businesses deliberately try for high employee turnover as a business model to keep costs low. An example would be an expensive car dealership hiring sales associates and technicians at lower than normal wages *but with* big promises.

Although productivity may not suffer on the upper end of management, the workflow on the low end could be severely influenced by the constant replacement of employees. High turnover puts a big burden on direct managers and experienced employees who suffer the brunt of the effects. Not having many employees with institutional knowledge also leaves them unequipped to handle difficult situations that may arise.

Reducing turnover is always a benefit. However, in businesses with naturally high turnover, be sure employees are well trained and have the resources they need to succeed. Don't rely on the same few experienced employees to pick up the slack, this could cause burnout quickly.

New employees

Similarly, adding new workers into the mix is a hard change that can sometimes cause problems. New employees aren't ready to handle things themselves and often need assistance from coworkers and managers. An overworked senior employee might not feel they have the time or ability to stop and frequently answer the questions of new hires. However, this can leave new hires frustrated and without direction.

Aside from hiring the right employee for the job, proper employee training is a good technique for avoiding workplace conflict. Additionally, ensure that new hires are supervised and know where to go for help, and that those employees you direct them to actually have the time to stop and help them.

Human resources should sit down with new employees for a few hours before they start to give them the scoop on how the workplace functions and also important subject matters like their insurance and 401k plan.

Interpersonal

Not every conflict in the workplace is a result of a process or environmental factor. Sometimes employees have a hard time working with one another for a variety of reasons. Sometimes these can be fixed, other times the differences might remain but employees can find a way to continue working together productively.

Cultural differences

Sadly, it is inevitable that cultural differences have the potential to cause problems in the workplace. For example, in most Western workplaces, being direct and answering quickly is a sign of confidence and is viewed favorably. However, in many Eastern workplaces, taking your time and leaving a moment or two of silence before you respond shows that you've taken the matter under proper consideration before responding. Neither way is right or wrong, but it certainly creates room for confusion among workers of different cultures.

As an employer, these cultural differences can be valuable. It is essential to promote love for all ethnicities and cultures in the workplace. Try to understand (even consider asking!) how different employees see things, especially when conflict arises. You might be surprised by each employee's perspective. It's your responsibility to foster a work environment where all employees are welcome to be themselves. Fortunately, these differences are usually simply a misunderstanding, and when explained can be easily overcome.

Style differences

Different work styles create employee conflict because there are multiple ways to complete tasks. One employee may want to do it one way, and another employee may want to do it the other way. This is generally fine, but it can create some issues and certain tasks should have a consistent process. For example, safety documentation is something that all employees should probably complete the same way. However, running a meeting might be done differently based on an employee's work style and abilities.

When appropriate, style differences should be considered by management. If one employee's ideas work better for the business than the other, then there may be a need for some employees to adapt to a style that doesn't suit them as well for certain tasks. This is ok and will happen sometimes. However, if the two differing employees both complete the same task differently but equally, it's not as big of a deal. In this case, management should try to help them peacefully deal with their differences.

Miscommunication/poor communication

Bad communication always causes lots of problems at work. A busser who serves the wrong plate of food at a restaurant will have the server(who gets the tips) red in the face with anger. Similarly, a manager who doesn't tell client services that a project is going to be delayed can lead to an awkward client meeting.

Communication issues should always be addressed. After all, they're not true impassable problems, simply breakdowns in communication. When in doubt, over-communication is better than the alternative. Different employees may have different communication styles, but there should always be baseline expectations for communication.

Consider having employees highlight their own communication preferences — perhaps they prefer more urgent messages to be sent over slack, emails for more detailed requests that aren't urgent, and meetings to kick off new projects. It's important to accommodate everyone's differences, but if the baseline communication needs and expectations aren't being met, then it's ok to set a higher bar and expectation.

Teamwork issues & personality clashes

Multiple employees mean people with differences are obligated to work together as a team. While unfortunate, it's inevitable that not everyone will get along well.

Management employees need to learn which employees work well with each other, and which employees don't vibe right. There is nothing wrong with separating employees who don't work well with each other--personality clashes can be avoided by using simple separation.

It's all for the benefit of the team.

Point of view

Additionally, people's points of view (or opposing points of view, rather) can create issues in the workplace. Different points of view are natural and even ideal. You don't want your workplace to succumb to groupthink and miss out on good ideas. However, there's a fine line between a healthy debate over ideas and an unhealthy conflict. If disagreements are leading to conflict that's making the workplace tense, then steps may need to be taken.

If issues occur with the same employees frequently, conflict management training may be a valuable option. Additionally, sometimes having a third party involved to mediate can be beneficial. Either way, this is a very serious recurring issue. If raising a contrary opinion often results in uncomfortable conflict, then employees may start to keep their opinions to themselves which hurts the workplace overall and reduces the diversity of thought you'll encounter.

Leadership

Company culture

Some companies have an extreme type of culture affiliated with them or may have very strong guiding principles that shape the business and draw a certain type of employee.

For example, an oil company may be comprised of mostly conservative thinking employees while a solar panel company may be packed full of liberally minded people. A tech start up might have a younger company culture where after-work beers and mid-day ping pong are common. An outdoor sporting goods store selling fishing and hunting equipment might have an annual hunting retreat which might not sit well with all company employees. Likewise, it's not safe to assume that all employees at a health food store are into fitness classes and the like.

There will be variations between employees, their coworkers, and company culture. However, that isn't an excuse to simply leave certain employees isolated. A business should be welcoming to all types of employees who work there and not let specific aspects of employee culture dominate the experience without making accommodations and exceptions for others.

Leadership conflict

Different leadership styles are a common problem in most all workspaces.

It goes without saying that some employees don't get along with their boss, and not every direct report will be their boss's favorite. However, beyond that, different employees have different styles of leadership. This means that an employee in one department may have a drastically different experience from an employee in another.

Additionally, these different styles of leadership may conflict with the interests and needs of different employees. While some employees may love being publicly recognized in a meeting, other more introverted employees may dread such things. It's important for leaders to understand their individual employees and not just apply a blanket approach to all employee interactions. Otherwise, they may be creating discomfort and room for conflict despite being well-intentioned.

Problem-solving and workplace conflict 101

Conflict management/conflict resolution is absolutely vital in the workplace. **There will be conflict** any time there are multiple employees in the same company — it's Murphy's Law.

Resolving conflict in the workplace doesn't have to be hard, but it does take hitting the nail right on the head when it does happen to occur.

Here are a few tips that will help both employers and employees avoid conflicts in the workplace.

Team building exercises

Helping your employees work as a team will boost production and morale. There are literally a million different ways team leaders can gather team members together for a quick game or meeting that helps lift team morale. While some employees may groan at the idea, these truly can be beneficial. Try to focus on teambuilding activities that help you learn about your coworker's communication and work styles. You might get more buy-in when team-building exercises have a clear benefit.

That being said, don't drain all the fun out of these kinds of activities. Remember, even the most serious jobs don't have to be serious *all the time*.

Training HR and management

Training management and human resources to deal with conflicts in the workplace will work wonders in running a clean and happy crew. Additionally, if you have the time and resources then consider training for your entire employee base. Having a baseline for all employees to work from could lead to significant improvements across your organization.

External input

There are some things that the most successful companies in the world do the same, and one is that they all seek external input as to how their company is running.

Just like it's hard to break habits within the family, the same goes for companies with employees who have

worked with each other for long periods of time.

The benefit of external input is to have an outsider and professional opinion about things that need to change in the workplace.

An example of positive external input is a restaurant owner who hires a world-renowned chef to come into the kitchen for a day or two and move things around to improve the flow of the food being cooked and delivered. However, lots of groups exist that do training and consulting. If you find you're having a difficult time training or tackling a particular source of conflict, consider outside help.

Tips for fixing miscommunication

Teaching good communication in the workplace will work wonders in preventing workplace conflicts. We recommend talking about communication, for one, and we also recommend setting up a recorded system that requires employees to communicate with each other--*make communication all part of the process.*

Tips for healing style differences

Management and ownership have a huge influence over employees and their styles.

Team building exercises can work wonders any time there are employees who don't work well together.

Bringing employees together with positive influence helps them forget about petty differences, and if it doesn't, then separation is the only other option---separate the employees so they don't have to work in close quarters with each other.

Training employees on workplace conflict

The best way to avoid conflicts in the workplace is by properly training HR professionals, management, and those hardworking employees on the lower end of the payroll.

The resolution process sometimes isn't easy, but most conflicts can be worked out without yelling and fighting--or even worse--lawsuits.