Workplace conflict examples and how to handle them

From petty squabbles to heated confrontations, workplaces experience conflicts. Resolving problems is in everyone's best interest, as a tension-filled environment can hurt productivity, morale, and teamwork.

While details from individual situations vary, workplace conflicts tend to fall under one of four categories: task conflicts, leadership conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, or value conflicts. Gaining insight into these umbrella terms assists with conflict prevention, identification of root cause, and resolution.

Here, we look at examples of true-to-life incidents and what can be learned from them:

Task conflict

Businesses hire people to perform services. That does not mean, however, that everyone always sees eye to eye on what duties a role entails or how different people's work affects the productivity of others. Work environments often experience task conflicts such as these two scenarios.

That's not my job

Ashley is none too happy when the supervisor at the non-profit where she works asks her to help Erin and Austin solicit donations during an annual drive. Ashley does not view making phone calls as part of her job and resents

needing to put the marketing project on which she was working on hold.

Things go well enough when the three meet to formulate a template for their calls, and Ashley even offers to run the lists of who each person will phone after lunch. Later in the day, Erin and Austin comment to each other how rough of a time they had getting donations. When Ashley passes by, they bring up the subject to her. She casually boasts that she already exceeded the weekly goal and probably won't be needed much longer. It later dawns on Erin and Austin to compare lists. They fume upon discovering Ashley's contains last year's top 50 donors. Now the boss has three irate employees.

Analysis: Claims of "that's not my job" are common in workplaces. Managers hearing this too often may need to reconsider listed responsibilities to more accurately reflect task expectations. While most job descriptions contain a clause stating the role includes "other tasks assigned by the manager as necessary," providing reasons for them may prove helpful.

For instance, knowing that the original third member of the solicitation team needed to travel out-of-state for two weeks to get his mother settled in hospice following surgery may have improved Ashley's attitude.

Task interdependencies

Before even entering, Nico knows why the manager at the luxury resort at which he works is calling him in. Nico oversees a team that puts the finishing touches on guest rooms. Several rooms today did not receive fresh-cut flowers on the nightstands and mints on the pillows. The cleaning crew once again ran over its allotted time, and Nico's staff members could not get into the rooms to add amenities before new guests arrived. He has tried talking to the head of the cleaning department, but she insists her team is doing its best. He has suggested to management to change check-in and check-out times to allow more room preparation between guests, but nobody seems interested in that solution.

Analysis: The work of one person often depends on the efforts of another. They must coordinate to enable each to complete his or her part. When this fails to happen, deadlines don't get made or quality suffers. Ill-will results.

Building a company culture that recognizes interdependency and promotes individual accountability can help. Employers also should make a point of seriously hearing out employee suggestions. Those with first-hand experience with situations often present worthy ideas, and listening promotes morale.
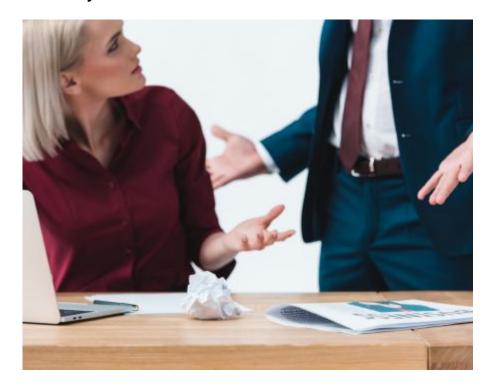
Leadership conflict

Leaders often step in to resolve employee conflict. Sometimes, however, managers themselves are the source of tension because of their leadership style. Consider these two rather common workplace conflicts.

Let's make a decision already

Carl glances at the caller ID info on his phone and lets it go to voicemail. He's embarrassed to talk to the rep from XYZ Tech. They met two weeks ago to go over the cost of upgrading the company's computer system. XYZ gave what Carl judged as a good price and excellent terms of service. But, Carl's boss Mike still has not given the official go-ahead to sign the contract. Every time Carl approaches the issue, Mike says he's still weighing things and might want to get more estimates. This frustrates Carl to no end — he has talked to three different companies already! Though he bites his tongue, Carl desperately wants to yell at Mike to make up his mind.

Analysis: Managers vary in how fast they make decisions. Some feel comfortable coming to conclusions pretty quickly. Others, like Mike, take more time or like to explore all possibilities. Depending on their own personality and the situation at hand, either style could prove irritating to employees. What one worker labels "hasty," another could see as "confident." What a certain employee calls "thorough," another may deem "neurotic."

Too many decision-makers

Amy works at a comic book shop owned by two brothers. Tommy is an innovative dreamer with little patience for the day-to-day details of running a small business. Tony is highly practical and spends much of his time overseeing operations and handling monetary matters. While Amy agrees with customers who are always saying how much the two brothers complement one another, she refrains from adding that they also rarely see eye to eye – and she's in the crossfire.

The latest battle is over an eight-foot-tall Thor statue that Tommy had her order to put in the store window. Tony blows a gasket when it arrives and tells her to return the pricey item immediately. Tommy comes in that afternoon eager for Thor at the entrance and goes nuts upon seeing Amy packaging him up. Angry at both men for all the hassle, Amy leaves for a long lunch.

Analysis: Just like the people they manage, leaders possess their own career goals and work styles. These differences can cause friction within the executive team. Employees taking direction from more than one manager may receive conflicting work orders or confusing expectations. To avoid putting this type of pressure on workers, managers need to communicate well with one another so that they can guide mutual team members more cohesively.

Interpersonal conflict

Relationships are tricky things, and ones in the workplace are no exception. These two examples of interpersonal conflict demonstrate how everything from misunderstandings to inherent personality differences can result in tensions.

Misunderstands are all-too-common

Julie walks by Sondra's cubicle and notices her colleague furiously assembling packets for that afternoon's marketing conference. She asks if she needs help. Sondra knows Julie already has a good deal on her own plate and politely declines the offer. A few minutes later, Sondra's boss summons her to the conference room to get her input on a PowerPoint presentation. Before you know it, 20 minutes pass. Sondra says she needs to scramble back to finish those packets. Her boss tells Ben, who also was in on their meeting, to help her.

Engrossed in finishing, they do not even see Julie pass. During the conference, though, Sondra notices that Julie keeps glaring at her and smirks when Sondra stumbles for a second during her speech. Sondra later learns from the office admin that Julie is telling people that Sondra is "uppity." Now, both women harbor grudges and avoid one another.

Analysis: This scenario showcases two of the most common causes of interpersonal conflict: miscommunication and assuming intentions. Julie sees the situation as Sondra rejecting her help but accepting Ben's. Feeling insulted, she retaliates. Sondra, without a clue about the root of the problem, reads Julie as a mean gossip.

To resolve conflict, the two need to clear the air, perhaps with the help of a third party. Such a meeting allows each person to express her side and learn how the other interpreted events. Laying out facts and true intentions can help fix damage from poor communication.

Different personalities types don't always mix well

Linda possesses what some might call an outgoing personality. If you ask Jennifer, though, she labels it just plain annoying. Linda finds her way into any conversation going on and quickly takes it over. She constantly wants to team up with others for problem-solving, while Jennifer greatly prefers independent work.

What Jennifer finds most troublesome, though, is Linda's disregard for personal space. She stands too close when talking and frequently touches other people's shoulders or wrists. When Linda went in for a big hug on Jennifer's birthday, it took all the restraint Jennifer could muster not to yell "hands off!"

Analysis: Personality clashes abound in the workplace. The individual traits of staff members can make for an interesting, innovative team. But, they also can grate on nerves. Smart companies push employees to develop emotional intelligence. People high in this skill are good at reading body language and other social cues. They alter their behavior accordingly to avoid conflict. Self-awareness enables them to understand their own feelings and actions, and empathy helps them view situations from the other person's side.

Value conflict

Workers hold various beliefs and moral codes. Workplace conflicts that arise from political, religious, or cultural differences can be quite passionate. Consider these two examples of value conflict – the first between two team members and the second between an employee and the employer:

Some conversations are best avoided

Rosalina puts on her headphones the minute she sees Kyle in his MAGA cap walk past her cubicle in the morning. She knows his first stop will be the water cooler, and she does not want to hear his conversation. Their differing opinions on everything from COVID vaccinations to abortion rights have made working together challenging over the past year or so. While she used to argue her point of view, human resources put out a memo to all staff members asking them to refrain from discussing politics in the work environment. Kyle still holds court when the boss isn't around, but Rosalina does not want to risk getting in trouble.

Analysis: Sometimes conflict resolution involves co-workers agreeing to disagree — and maintaining distance. HR's proactive efforts to handle conflict before it escalated made a difference. All business owners and managers, though, should keep an open ear to what might be going on behind their back and talk to individuals accordingly.

Differing priorities can lead to dissatisfaction

Jacob does not feel like going to work today, but he has already depleted his PTO. He used to enjoy his sales position at a consumer electronics retailer, but nowadays the job stresses him out. The company culture is

about profits, not people. Leaders encourage workers to push pricey or unnecessary items rather than what is actually in the customer's best interest.

Jacob has witnessed co-workers deliberately fudging estimated delivery dates simply to make a sale. And after Jacob spent time the other day helping an elderly customer navigate her new mobile phone, his manager suggested that before his next performance review Jacob learn to evaluate the "worth" of people coming through the door and focus on those most "deserving" of his time. Always close to his own grandmother and raised by a single mother, Jacob felt sick at the thought of following that advice.

Analysis: Burnout and absenteeism both rise at places where company ethics and employee values do not match well. Quitting becomes an attractive option for conflicted workers. Factors such as lack of other opportunities or difficulty walking away from a good salary, however, come into play. Thus, resolving conflicts of this nature often requires intense consideration of personal standards vs. career concerns.