

Foolproof strategies to resolve conflict in the workplace

Are you looking for strategies to resolve conflict in the workplace? Conflict in the workplace is normal, but when conflict becomes unhealthy or toxic it can significantly harm the workplace. Let's explore some ways to resolve conflict productively and make conflict, surprisingly, work for you.

In this BusinessManagementDaily.com article, we cover:

- Steps for working through the resolution process
- Strategies to resolve conflict in the workplace
- Workplace characteristics that help prevent conflict in the workplace

Conflict in the workplace is completely normal — some might argue that it's even healthy. According to many psychologists, conflict becomes unhealthy when it starts to be emotional or personal. When conflict gets to a personal level, it very commonly clouds judgment and hurts the situation.

Healthy conflict is when employees can have a positive disagreement resulting in a more powerful solution.

Types Of Conflict

Before we brainstorm strategies for managing conflict, let's take a quick look at some examples:

Conflict over resources

The struggle for evenly distributing funds is constant. One employee might feel he deserves a bigger piece of the pie, and maybe they deserve it. That's for management to decide.

Interdependence

Conflicts arise when one employee depends on another's presence/performance for success.

Discrimination

Sadly, discrimination does occur in many workplaces, and it isn't always over race or religion. While scholars may debate over the specific definition of discrimination, most would agree that discrimination over a wide variety of things such as background, lifestyle, upbringing, and much more can take place.

Opposing creative ideas

One can naturally have a different point of view from another, and conflict can arise when these ideas clash with each other.

Strategies 101: Handling Conflict With Solid Management Skills

Effective conflict resolution is easy with the right set of skills. Here is a list of attributes that the human resources and management team should work on to successfully handle conflict in the workplace.

"According to many psychologists, conflict becomes unhealthy when it starts to be emotional or personal. When conflict gets to a personal level, it very commonly clouds judgment and hurts the situation."



Effective communication

Difficult situations can be made less difficult with clear communication in the workplace. Teaching employees to have good communication skills is beneficial for every part of the business.

This may include not only coaching on how to interact with one another, especially when conflict happens, but also how to implement good communication practices into the workflow.

Teamwork exercises

A quick internet search will yield hundreds of teambuilding exercises that you can use as a tool to create a positive workplace that doesn't see conflict.

Teamwork exercises help to make conflict healthy, and it's a great time to weed out (and also recognize) the toxic types of conflict that happen.

Many teamwork exercises may seem pointless to employees, however, some can be a benefit. It's important to carefully consider what exercises you choose to do, and dedicate time to them. A one-hour one-off team building activity may not have a drastic impact. Several activities over a period of time, or a full-day session could be more impactful.

Active listening

Listening is sometimes hard to do for someone who's in charge, but management and human resources departments that know how to listen to their employees typically run the tightest ship.

Collaborating

Collaborating in a positive way with employees is a good way to keep them engaged. Most people naturally like positive collaboration from management and HR. It can create a sense of importance and involvement, and who doesn't like a little attention?

Many disputes are more likely to happen without management around, so the more positive interaction the employees get with their managing team members the less likely they'll be to raise problems in a toxic and unhealthy way (though no guarantees).

Sound decision-making

Decision-making is a crucial moment in resolving the conflict — one bad decision could turn into a disaster, but one good decision can take the edge off of the situation.

When handling conflict, think carefully about the actions and decisions you take. Consider each participant's perspective, and take time to approach it thoughtfully. If you seem dismissive of someone's concerns, even if you truly care, they'll be less likely to trust you and engage in the process.



Creating a solid company culture

Human resources and management play a huge role in creating a company culture where all employees feel accepted.

Generally, one of the best ways to create good company culture is by neutrality.

For example, there is no reason for employers to hold an opinion about sexuality, political stance, religion, etc. in the workplace. However, businesses should have policies that do not isolate employees based on these things. In some cases, it may be appropriate to speak out about current events. More and more employees expect employers to be empathetic. However, think carefully before you do so and know that while some employees may appreciate it, others may feel isolated by it.

Typically, this also means encouraging other employees to keep their opinions on controversial topics out of the workplace.

In the end, the most important thing is that the employee is performing their job the way they should be and that employees feel supported and respected.

Online courses

Use all the online resources you can get when dealing with conflicts. There are a wide variety of online courses and training modules available, though the quality of these may vary as well. Beyond that, however, there are also less formal resources available. For example, you might be able to find people talking in a forum about a work problem that's exactly like the one you're currently dealing with.

Of course, here at Business Management Daily, we have plenty of online resources for all your HR needs.



Recognizing people's natural reaction to conflict

One helpful skill when dealing with conflict is recognizing employees' natural reactions. For example, one employee might get angry and explode because of a certain problem, and the other employee might curl up in a ball in the corner when the same problem occurs.

Needless to say, feeling out employee personality styles in the workplace is a must.

Here are a few examples of employee reactions when conflict occurs:

Passive action (avoidance)

Some employees either won't know how to deal with a conflict or won't want to deal with it, and that's when they'll (at least try to) take the silent road out of things.

Some employees could even start displaying attendance problems because of a problem whether it be because of a conflictive work task or an argument between employees. This should be a red flag if an employee starts exhibiting this type of behavior out of the blue, or if they start to seem disengaged.

The important point to teach passive employees is that sometimes doing nothing isn't beneficial for the situation. Addressing conflict is generally unpleasant, however, if an issue is permitted to continue it could escalate and cause even greater issues down the road. It's best to address immediately that happens.

Competitive reaction

Often when conflicts arise in the workplace, employees will choose between a fight or flight response. When an employee opts to fight, that can also come with its own set of problems.

Now, if the conflict is a difficult work problem, then a competitive reaction *can be* good, if it's handled well. An employee who feels strongly about an idea and wants to fight for it can be a benefit.

However, an employee whose innate response to conflict is to dominate the conversation and win no matter what, is likely to contribute to a toxic environment. After all, the one who speaks the loudest isn't always the one with the best idea. Letting these issues run rampant could cause you to miss out on good ideas.

These situations can be handled with coaching and conflict mediation, though if a conflict turns into verbal or physical abuse then it should be dealt with immediately.

Body language

Managers and HR should look for signs of body language in their work environment that may indicate conflict. You might see an employee looking exceptionally depressed or put out — that's a good moment to step in and ask them what's wrong.

Conflict Resolution Strategies In Steps

How are conflicts resolved in the workplace? There isn't one specific way to resolve workplace conflict. However, there are some general guidelines you can follow when trying to practice conflict management.

Step One: Identify the conflict/Find the root cause of the conflict

You won't be able to manage conflict if you can't identify it. Many conflicts will come to your attention on their own, but some will require more detective work on the HR/management side to properly identify.

Listen to both/all parties involved in the conflict before proceeding any further.

No one considers themselves the villain in a situation and both sides of the story will typically have at least some truth to them. That's why it's important to listen to everyone.

Techniques for finding the cause of conflict will vary depending on the situation. Keep in mind that some conflicts are healthy in the workplace and determine which conflicts actually need to be dealt with.

Some conflicts might be hard to track down, but good managers have eagle eyes for finding and preventing problems

Step Two: Confront the conflict head-on

Sometimes conflicts can go on for days, weeks, or even years without the proper confrontation.

That's why it's important to call a meeting and confront the conflict. Letting something continue and bubble up only prolongs the inevitable. It's best to address quickly before an issue escalates and starts impacting the business in more ways.

Step Three: Solve the problem by finding common ground between employees

While one hopes that employees can work a situation out themselves, if it has escalated to the point that HR or management is involved, that's probably not the case. In this situation, the problem will never end if a mediator doesn't step in with an effort to find a common ground within the conflict.

A good start to conflict resolution is identifying the areas of agreement and disagreement, then working towards a solution that both parties can agree to.

Step Four: Following through

Remember, not all conflicts are solved on the first go-round. It's HR/management/ownership's responsibility to follow through on their conflict resolution strategy to ensure that the conflict doesn't become a recurring event.

Consider checking back in with employees after a period of time to ensure that things are still going well. You may need to readjust and try new approaches if problems still exist.

Management is key

Thus far, we've discussed some solid characteristics and techniques for combating conflict, and we've ran through some helpful steps that you can apply the next time a conflict happens in your workplace. However, there's one last thing worth addressing.

Problems happen in the workplace, and sometimes the problem has been in management all along. Now, some managers can be difficult when it comes to changing toxic policies or poor game plans. Good managers are willing to admit that a problem was their mistake.

In these cases, human resources must be relied on to step in. Don't simply assume that an issue between employees is only between employees. Consider what role managers play in creating conflict, especially if the conflict is between an employee and their manager. Ultimately, it's HRs responsibility to ensure employees are treated fairly.