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Managing conflict



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What is it?

Conflict can be defined as behaviour that is intended to obstruct the achievement of another person's goals. Conflict is an inevitable part of the change process, so while you cannot avoid it, you can learn how to manage it effectively – even transforming it into a positive force for change.

Conflict at work can often take three main forms:

- 1. Task conflict** – includes differences of opinion, viewpoints and ideas. Some task conflict can actually be beneficial to the change process as it enables people to discuss a more diverse range of views and ideas before making decisions.
- 2. Process conflict** – involves disagreement over the logistics of achieving an outcome or change. For example, who takes on which responsibilities or who delegates to whom.
- 3. Relationship conflict** – often the most destructive form of conflict and takes the form of perceived interpersonal incompatibility between people. This may be on the basis of personal values, morals or personality characteristics.

Using this tool will give you effective strategies for managing conflict and help you prevent or resolve attempts to derail the change process. This will, in turn, enable you to gain greater staff consensus on your project.

When to use it

Change provokes a range of emotions in people: many are wary of it or resist it on principle and try to obstruct the process, resulting in conflict. When this occurs, you may need to intervene in the first stages of conflict by preventing, containing or handling such behaviour as early as possible.

How to use it

Conflict can range from minor misunderstandings to highly destructive behaviours. Generally, conflicts have two elements:

- the relationship between the people involved
- the issue that is the basis of the disagreement.

When conflict arises, you need to intervene by preventing, containing or handling it – even if you are involved in the conflict yourself.

Identifying the signs of conflict

While observing a heated argument between work colleagues is an obvious sign of conflict, many of the signs of conflict (especially the early signs) are subtle. Early signs may include:

- a reduction in people volunteering for tasks or contributing to meetings
- a reduction in motivation or team morale
- a greater reluctance to offer ideas or discuss feelings openly
- an increase in dissatisfaction or the development of a 'them and us' culture
- greater avoidance between team members, which may also include increased rates of sickness absence.

What to do

1. Prevent escalation of conflict by identifying the early signs and taking action. Conflict is unlikely to resolve itself and so to prevent it escalating, ask yourself the following questions as soon as conflict becomes apparent.

- What type of conflict is it – task, process or relational? Is each party keen to meet and thrash things out (hot conflict)? Are issues kept quiet and under the surface (cold conflict)?
- What are the most important underlying influences at work?
- What is the context of the conflict?
- Where is the conflict going?
- How can I intervene?
- What needs to happen now?

If the conflict gets worse, you will probably need to bring in someone else to help the parties involved develop longer term strategies for resolution.

2. Remember that conflicts are more about people than problems, so understand and value the differences between the parties involved - which may include you. Contain it by dealing with difficulties and tensions, working to re-establish relationships (see [how to understand differences between individuals](#)).

- Recognise your own style with its strengths and limitations.
- Listen and try to understand the other person instead of attributing a motive from your own viewpoint. A way of doing this is to try and metaphorically put yourself in their shoes.
- Ask open questions to develop your understanding of the other person's goal instead of attributing a motive from your viewpoint.
- Try and re-frame the conflict to make it less personal (relationship conflict). Re-focus the conversation onto the bigger picture (overall aims), rather than whether people get along or not.
- Collaboratively look for a solution that incorporates different viewpoints.

3. Handle the conflict by taking positive steps to deal with the issues and then monitor the effects. The following checklist may be useful at any stage of conflict resolution:

Figure 1: Conflict resolution checklist

Do:	Don't:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ensure the issues are fully outlined• acknowledge emotions and different styles• make sure you have a comfortable environment for any meeting• set a time frame for the discussion• establish good rapport• use names and, if appropriate, title throughout• work to cool down the debate in a hot conflict• convince parties in a cold conflict that something can be done.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• conduct your conversation in a public place• leave the discussion open – instead create an action plan• finish other people's sentences for them• use jargon• constantly interrupt• do something else while trying to listen• distort the truth• use inappropriate humour.

Conflict means different things to different people. This may be owing to to their personal styles or professional training. Some people enjoy a heated discussion while others find it upsetting or intimidating. Just because someone asks you lots of pointed questions or disagrees with you in a meeting does not mean they are against you or the objectives of the project. It may just be their way of gathering further information to think about later.

Remember that clinical professionals in general are trained to challenge information, concepts and ideas. They may simply be testing out the validity of the project and your knowledge. Direct questioning does not mean that people are against the proposal.

The main thing is to acknowledge any conflict and not to avoid it. Describe the issues involved, talk about it and work through it.

What next?

Other useful tools and techniques that may help you include:

- [Active listening](#)
- [Overcoming barriers](#)
- [Enabling collaboration by working with resistance](#)

Additional resources

Huczynski, A and Buchanan, D (2013) *Organizational Behaviour*, Pearson Education Limited: Harlow, UK