

Managing Conflict at Work

Usually, conflict with colleagues at work is something we want to avoid: nobody wants to be in a position where we feel uncomfortable, or viewed as being hostile and negative. However, the reality is that we're never going to agree with or even like everyone we work with, and it's often easier to stew in a negative situation than manage it effectively for fear of confronting the issue.

Conflict in the workplace is often viewed as disruptive, but when managed effectively, conflict can actually be a catalyst for growth, innovation, and stronger team dynamics. It provides an opportunity for different perspectives to be shared, problems to be addressed, and relationships to be strengthened.

EMBRACING CONFLICT: THE BENEFITS

It's important to point out that conflict can be more than simply than not getting along with someone. Conflict can be triggered because we feel our ideas, actions or decisions at work are dismissed or not valued, and this can happen at all levels.

In these scenarios, conflict can actually be a window for change, and when approached constructively, can bring about several benefits in the workplace, such as:

Enhanced decision-making: Conflict invites diverse viewpoints and challenges the status quo. It encourages critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation of various options, leading to better decision-making outcomes.

Innovation and creativity: When conflicting ideas collide, it sparks creativity and innovation. The clash of perspectives can generate new insights, novel solutions, and out-of-the-box thinking that may not have emerged in a harmonious environment.

Strengthened relationships: Conflict provides an opportunity for individuals to express their concerns, expectations, and needs. Open and honest communication during conflict resolution can foster deeper understanding, empathy, and trust among team members, ultimately strengthening relationships.

Personal and professional growth: Through conflict, individuals can develop essential skills such as active listening, negotiation, compromise, and problem-solving. It promotes self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience, leading to personal and professional growth.

PRACTICING HEALTHY CONFLICT: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

While conflict can have positive outcomes, it is crucial to approach it in a healthy and productive manner — something all employees should be able to do safely. Here are some strategies for practicing healthy conflict at work:

Foster a sense of safety: It helps to have an environment where team members feel safe to express their opinions and concerns without fear of judgment or reprisal. Lead by example and practice open and respectful communication, emphasising that conflict is a natural part of collaboration.

Actively listen: Actively listen to understand others' perspectives, without interrupting or dismissing someone else's viewpoint. Demonstrate empathy and validate their feelings and experiences. Paraphrase and clarify their statements to ensure accurate comprehension.

Be respectful: Use "I" statements to express your thoughts and feelings, focusing on the impact of specific behaviours or actions rather than attacking individuals personally. Avoid accusatory language and strive for clarity, brevity, and diplomacy in your communication.

Seek common ground: Look for shared interests and common goals when conflicting viewpoints arise. Identify areas of agreement and build upon them to find mutually beneficial solutions. Emphasize collaboration and teamwork.



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over personal agendas.

Be constructive: Provide feedback in a constructive and specific manner, focusing on behaviours and outcomes rather than making it personal. Offer suggestions for improvement and invite others to share their feedback as well.

Mediation and facilitation: If you feel conflict has become unmanageable, consider involving a neutral third party to facilitate discussions and help find a resolution. Mediators can provide an unbiased perspective and guide the conversation towards a positive outcome.

Be aware of your emotions: Develop emotional intelligence skills to navigate conflict effectively. Practice self-awareness, recognising and managing your own emotions during conflict. Foster empathy towards others' perspectives and emotions, and regulate your responses to maintain a calm and composed demeanour.

Learn from conflict: If you've had a bad experience before, you'll know how hard it can be to come back and build bridges. It's important to look at areas for improvement, and seek strategies to prevent similar conflicts in the future.

WHEN CONFLICT BECOMES DESTRUCTIVE

While healthy conflict is beneficial, destructive conflict can be detrimental to individuals and the organisation. It is important to recognise the signs of destructive conflict and take proactive measures to address them.

Unresolved tension: If conflicts linger without resolution or escalate over time, they can erode trust, productivity, and morale. Address conflicts promptly and provide the necessary support to reach a resolution.

Negative behaviours: Watch out for aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviours, personal attacks, and disrespectful communication. These behaviours can intensify conflicts and create a toxic work environment.

Polarisation: When conflicts result in "us versus them" mentality or factions within the team, it hinders collaboration and teamwork. Encourage open dialogue, bridge divides, and promote a sense of unity.

Escalation: If conflicts escalate into confrontations or become excessively disruptive, intervention may be necessary. Involve appropriate management or HR personnel to mediate and facilitate resolution.

Repeated conflicts: If conflicts continually arise within the same team or between specific individuals, it may indicate deeper issues that need to be addressed. Investigate the underlying causes and implement proactive measures to prevent recurring conflicts.

TIPS FOR LEADERSHIP

Leaders play a critical role in fostering healthy conflict and managing disputes within their teams.

Set the tone: Leaders should model and promote open, respectful, and inclusive communication. Encourage employees to voice their concerns, challenge ideas, and engage in healthy debates.

Provide training and support: Offer conflict management and communication skills training to employees at all levels. Equip them with the tools and techniques to navigate conflicts effectively and facilitate resolution.

Encourage collaboration: Foster a collaborative culture where teamwork and cooperation are valued. Emphasise the importance of resolving conflicts constructively and finding win-win solutions.

Address conflicts proactively: Leaders should address conflicts early on, intervening when necessary to prevent them from escalating. Provide a safe space for employees to express their concerns and facilitate discussions to find resolutions.

Lead by example: Leaders should demonstrate effective conflict management behaviours themselves. Show empathy, active listening, and a commitment to finding common ground. This sets the standard for others to follow.



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When managed with a healthy and constructive approach, conflict in the workplace can lead to positive outcomes, including improved decision making, innovation, and strengthened relationships. By embracing conflict, practicing active listening, respectful communication, and seeking common ground, individuals and organisations can harness the benefits of conflict for personal growth, collaboration, and enhanced team dynamics. With effective conflict management strategies in place and leadership support, organisations can create a culture that embraces healthy conflict as a driver of success and continuous improvement.

Converge offers 24-hour, 7 day a week counselling support. The great thing is, because we offer phone and videoconferencing facilities, we can provide that support for you, even if you're at home. To access the EAP services, simply call 1300 687 327 to make a time to speak with one of our team.



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