Conflict Resolution
Resolving conflict rationally and effectively

In many cases, conflict in the workplace just seems to be a fact of life. We've all seen situations where different people with different goals and needs have come into conflict. And we've all seen the often-intense personal animosity that can result.

The fact that conflict exists, however, is not necessarily a bad thing: As long as it is resolved effectively, it can lead to personal and professional growth.

In many cases, effective conflict resolution can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes.

The good news is that by resolving conflict successfully, you can solve many of the problems that it has brought to the surface, as well as getting benefits that you might not at first expect:

- **Increased understanding**: The discussion needed to resolve conflict expands people's awareness of the situation, giving them an insight into how they can achieve their own goals without undermining those of other people.
- **Increased group cohesion**: When conflict is resolved effectively, team members can develop stronger mutual respect, and a renewed faith in their ability to work together.
- **Improved self-knowledge**: Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals in close detail, helping them understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness.

However, if conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be damaging. Conflicting goals can quickly turn into personal dislike. Teamwork breaks down. Talent is wasted as people disengage from their work. And it’s easy to end up in a vicious downward spiral of negativity and recrimination.

If you’re to keep your team or organization working effectively, you need to stop this downward spiral as soon as you can. To do this, it helps to understand two of the theories that lie behind effective conflict resolution:

**Understanding the Theory: Conflict Styles**

In the 1970s Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They argued that people typically have a preferred conflict resolution style. However they also noted that different styles were most useful in different situations. They developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which helps you to identify which style you tend towards when conflict arises.

Thomas and Kilmann's styles are:

**Competitive**: People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast; when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.
Collaborative: People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution; when there have been previous conflicts in the group; or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off.

Compromising: People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something and the compromiser herself also expects to relinquish something. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming.

Accommodating: This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is highly cooperative. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning, or when you want to be in a position to collect on this "favor" you gave. However people may not return favors, and overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

Avoiding: People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. However in many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take.

Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you're in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary.

Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships.

Understanding The Theory: The "Interest-Based Relational Approach"

The second theory is commonly referred to as the "Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach". This type of conflict resolution respects individual differences while helping people avoid becoming too entrenched in a fixed position.

In resolving conflict using this approach, you follow these rules:

- **Make sure that good relationships are the first priority:** As far as possible, make sure that you treat the other calmly and that you try to build mutual respect. Do your best to be courteous to one-another and remain constructive under pressure.

- **Keep people and problems separate:** Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflictive positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.

- **Pay attention to the interests that are being presented:** By listening carefully you'll most-likely understand why the person is adopting his or her position.

- **Listen first; talk second:** To solve a problem effectively you have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending your own position.
• Set out the "Facts": Agree and establish the objective, observable elements that will have an impact on the decision.

• Explore options together: Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you can get to this idea jointly.

By following these rules, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so-often causes conflict to spin out of control.

Using the Tool: A Conflict Resolution Process

Based on these approaches, a starting point for dealing with conflict is to identify the overriding conflict style employed by yourself, your team or your organization.

Over time, people's conflict management styles tend to mesh, and a "right" way to solve conflict emerges. It's good to recognize when this style can be used effectively, however make sure that people understand that different styles may suit different situations.

Look at the circumstances, and think about the style that may be appropriate.

Then use the process below to resolve the conflict:

Step One: Set the Scene

If appropriate to the situation, agree the rules of the IBR Approach (or at least consider using the approach yourself.) Make sure that people understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression.

If you are involved in the conflict, emphasize the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Use active listening skills to ensure you hear and understand other's positions and perceptions.

• Restate.
• Paraphrase.
• Summarize.

And make sure that when you talk, you're using an adult, assertive approach rather than a submissive or aggressive style.

Step Two: Gather Information

Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect his or her opinion and need his or her cooperation to solve the problem.

Try to understand his or her motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these.
Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms: Is it affecting work performance? damaging the delivery to the client? disrupting team work? hampering decision-making? or so on. Be sure to focus on work issues and leave personalities out of the discussion.

- Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view.
- Identify issues clearly and concisely.
- Use "I" statements.
- Remain flexible.
- Clarify feelings.

**Step Three: Agree the Problem**

This sounds like an obvious step, but often different underlying needs, interests and goals can cause people to perceive problems very differently. You'll need to agree the problems that you are trying to solve before you'll find a mutually acceptable solution.

Sometimes different people will see different but interlocking problems – if you can't reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very least, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

**Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions**

If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never considered before.

**Step Five: Negotiate a Solution**

By this stage, the conflict may be resolved: Both sides may better understand the position of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all.

However you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. This is where a technique like **win-win negotiation** can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone.

There are three guiding principles here: Be Calm, Be Patient, Have Respect.

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**Key Points**

Conflict in the workplace can be incredibly destructive to good teamwork.

Managed in the wrong way, real and legitimate differences between people can quickly spiral out of control, resulting in situations where co-operation breaks down and the team's mission is threatened. This is particularly the case where the wrong approaches to conflict resolution are used.

To calm these situations down, it helps to take a positive approach to conflict resolution, where discussion is courteous and non-confrontational, and the focus is on issues rather than on individuals. If this is done, then, as long as people listen carefully and explore facts, issues and possible solutions properly, conflict can often be resolved effectively.
Win-Win Negotiation
Finding a fair compromise

Do you feel that someone is continually taking advantage of you? Do you seem to have to fight your corner aggressively, or ally with others, to win the resources you need? Or do you struggle to get what you want from people whose help you need, but over whom you have little direct authority? If so, you may need to brush up your win-win negotiation skills.

Effective negotiation helps you to resolve situations where what you want conflicts with what someone else wants. The aim of win-win negotiation is to find a solution that is acceptable to both parties, and leaves both parties feeling that they've won, in some way, after the event.

There are different styles of negotiation, depending on circumstances.

Where you do not expect to deal with people ever again and you do not need their goodwill, then it may be appropriate to "play hardball", seeking to win a negotiation while the other person loses out. Many people go through this when they buy or sell a house – this is why house-buying can be such a confrontational and unpleasant experience.

Similarly, where there is a great deal at stake in a negotiation, then it may be appropriate to prepare in detail and legitimate "gamesmanship" to gain advantage. Anyone who has been involved with large sales negotiations will be familiar with this.

Neither of these approaches is usually much good for resolving disputes with people with whom you have an ongoing relationship: If one person plays hardball, then this disadvantages the other person – this may, quite fairly, lead to reprisal later. Similarly, using tricks and manipulation during a negotiation can undermine trust and damage teamwork. While a manipulative person may not get caught out if negotiation is infrequent, this is not the case when people work together routinely. Here, honesty and openness are almost always the best policies.

Preparing for a successful negotiation

Depending on the scale of the disagreement, some preparation may be appropriate for conducting a successful negotiation.

For small disagreements, excessive preparation can be counter-productive because it takes time that is better used elsewhere. It can also be seen as manipulative because, just as it strengthens your position, it can weaken the other person's.

However, if you need to resolve a major disagreement, then make sure you prepare thoroughly. Using our free worksheet, think through the following points before you start negotiating:

- **Goals:** what do you want to get out of the negotiation? What do you think the other person wants?
- **Trades:** What do you and the other person have that you can trade? What do you each have that the other wants? What are you each comfortable giving away?
- **Alternatives:** if you don't reach agreement with the other person, what alternatives do you have? Are these good or bad? How much does it matter if you do not reach agreement? Does failure to reach an agreement cut you out of future opportunities? And what alternatives might the other person have?


- **Relationships**: what is the history of the relationship? Could or should this history impact the negotiation? Will there be any hidden issues that may influence the negotiation? How will you handle these?

- **Expected outcomes**: what outcome will people be expecting from this negotiation? What has the outcome been in the past, and what precedents have been set?

- **The consequences**: what are the consequences for you of winning or losing this negotiation? What are the consequences for the other person?

- **Power**: who has what power in the relationship? Who controls resources? Who stands to lose the most if agreement isn't reached? What power does the other person have to deliver what you hope for?

- **Possible solutions**: based on all of the considerations, what possible compromises might there be?

**Style is critical**

For a negotiation to be ‘win-win’, both parties should feel positive about the negotiation once it’s over. This helps people keep good working relationships afterwards. This governs the style of the negotiation – histrionics and displays of emotion are clearly inappropriate because they undermine the rational basis of the negotiation and because they bring a manipulative aspect to them.

Despite this, emotion can be an important subject of discussion because people's emotional needs must fairly be met. If emotion is not discussed where it needs to be, then the agreement reached can be unsatisfactory and temporary. Be as detached as possible when discussing your own emotions – perhaps discuss them as if they belong to someone else.

**Negotiating successfully**

The negotiation itself is a careful exploration of your position and the other person's position, with the goal of finding a mutually acceptable compromise that gives you both as much of what you want as possible. People's positions are rarely as fundamentally opposed as they may initially appear – the other person may have very different goals from the ones you expect!

In an ideal situation, you will find that the other person wants what you are prepared to trade, and that you are prepared to give what the other person wants.

If this is not the case and one person must give way, then it is fair for this person to try to negotiate some form of compensation for doing so – the scale of this compensation will often depend on the many of the factors we discussed above. Ultimately, both sides should feel comfortable with the final solution if the agreement is to be considered win-win.

Only consider win-lose negotiation if you don't need to have an ongoing relationship with the other party as, having lost, they are unlikely to want to work with you again. Equally, you should expect that if they need to fulfill some part of a deal in which you have “won,” they may be uncooperative and legalistic about the way they do this.