

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2024 Edition

Feature

Getting Working Relationships Back on Track

Managing conflict in a collaborative way

Conflict is a normal part of any healthy relationship at work (or home). As much as we would like, people can't be expected to agree on everything, all the time. We all have diverse perspectives and thoughts for solutions and that's great. Learning how to manage conflict effectively, rather than avoiding it or neglecting your needs, is a crucial competency for us all- especially in the workplace!

When conflict is managed in a respectful, collaborative way, it provides an opportunity to strengthen working relationships and allows us to be effective and productive at work. Unresolved conflict has a major impact on productivity for ourselves, our teams and others. Unresolved conflict can lead us down a path of destructiveness and stress.

Conflict arises from perceived differences and encompasses people's values, motivations, perceptions, ideas or desires. Sometimes these differences appear trivial, but when a conflict escalates, a deep personal need is often at the core of the issue. These needs can present in the form of reputation, transparency, job security or a need to feel respected and valued. The needs of both parties play important roles in the long-term success of working relationships, and each party deserves to have their needs met. Opposing or incompatible needs are often at the heart of unresolved disputes, but solutions can be found if we dig deeper.

We can have a different type of conversation if we become aware of our own and the other parties' needs and are open to examining them with a goal of building understanding. Let's move away from right vs wrong and defensiveness to dig beneath the surface for values, beliefs, hopes and desires. Our needs may be similar or may differ, so let's examine solutions that meet both parties' needs. Holding a conversation at this level can open pathways to creative problem solving, team building, and improved working relationships.

Acknowledging others can also shift the conversation. Try these three questions to get at the root of the issue:

1. What more can you tell me about this?
2. What am I missing?
3. What's been the hardest part?

Some further points to keep in mind when resolving conflict:

- **It's not about you:** When someone approaches you passionately, it's about their unmet need, not yours. Can you determine the unmet need and shine a light on it?
- **Reactions can be strong in conflict:** Does the passion in the situation create a perceived threat (for you or the other party)? Think about how you want to respond instead of going with your first reaction which likely comes from the brain in its flight/fight/freeze state.
- **Conflicts do not disappear when ignored:** Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.



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- **We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions** of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts (no matter how logical we think we are). Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values and beliefs. This can be referred to as the 'truth of your experience', which may differ greatly from the 'truth of someone else's experience'. That's okay too. Let's acknowledge those differences and focus on moving forward.

Conflicts are an opportunity for growth. When you're able to successfully resolve conflicts at work, it builds trust and helps us better understand ourselves and others. It's okay to ask for help if the conflict has escalated or the tools you have at hand are not working. Reach out to HR or an external conflict management specialist and that previously unresolvable conflict may be a turning point in your working relationship.

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