

## How to Address Workplace Conflict

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Conflicts in the workplace are inevitable and normal. A common approach to them, however, is to either avoid it, or to fight; two typically unproductive approaches that can escalate things further. Dealing with problems in a timely manner with the right approaches will help resolve or even prevent them from growing into larger issues.

### Reasons for conflict

One reason for conflict is around specific disagreements on issues like allocation of resources (e.g. budgets, time, supplies), incompatible goals or changes in the company<sup>1</sup>. Lacking performance (or having such a perception) by a co-worker; unclear roles and/or definitions of responsibility; and conflicts of interest (individual vs. organization goal) may also occur<sup>2</sup>. Some conflict stems not so much from differences; but from pride, jealousy, blaming, uncivil/abusive behavior, etc. Sometimes there is conflict caused by misunderstanding or miscommunication, not by any actual difference of opinion.



Another common reason for conflict stems from differing viewpoints based on personality or ways of viewing the world. There are many ways our various perspectives and ways of communicating can lead to conflict. These can come from generational differences, personality types/differences in style, gender differences and cultural/ethnic differences. For example, this scenario from [makeadentleadership.com](http://makeadentleadership.com)<sup>3</sup> shows an instance where a difference in workstyle may cause conflict:

**One person may want to get the work done quickly (task oriented) and get on to the next thing as fast as possible. While another person is more concerned about making sure that everyone has a say in how the work gets done (people oriented).**

If interested in learning more about your own personality and styles at work; and how they interact with other types, the DISC personality test can be very helpful. A free version of the test can be completed [here](#).

Having differences like these can help make a strong work team that brings a variety of ideas to the table. Just imagine if everyone was similar. There may be little conflict, but what would the quality of the work really be? Effectively addressing and resolving conflicts can help build trust in team members, where it feels safe to discuss differences. This is “healthy” conflict where open, honest and respectful examination of the issues can lead to new ideas and ways to approach problems.

Learning about how we are different helps us to not take things personally. I remember watching a TV show years ago with the comedian George Carlin. He asked, “Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?” To me, this gets at the heart of how our attributions for our own behavior is self-serving, but the same acts in someone else is seen as a personality flaw. Sticking with the driving theme here; another example of our biases could be seen when being cut-off by another driver. Our tendency is to blame some personal character flaw in that person (they are a rude and inconsiderate jerk). If I cut-off someone (if I even know that I did so), it is because of circumstances like another driver causing it, or I am in a hurry to get somewhere (not because I’m an inconsiderate jerk, of course; it’s for a “legitimate” reason!).

So now that we know some common causes for conflict, what do we do about it?

## 7 Ways to Address Conflict

**Address it.** Ignoring it and hoping it will go away on its own may not solve anything. Negative feelings and resentments will fester and will find a way to be expressed; usually in unfortunate ways and at unfortunate times. Silence as a response is likely to be taken as agreement. There may be a need to “pick your battles” (not suggesting a fight here, but you get the point!) if there are multiple concerns. Avoidance of, or giving in on, a specific situation may work okay if you are able to truly let go of it. Giving the other person their way might at times be the best move for you.

**Express disagreement directly.** This is the only way to ensure your viewpoint is getting across. Indirect expression by complaining to third parties, passive-aggressive actions and other drama will only cause further problems. Be sure to be direct, honest and respectful as you discuss your views.

**Don’t assume and watch your own biases.** If there is one safe assumption to make, it is that your impression of the other person’s motives and intentions is quite likely wrong, and unless you check it out, your views may be utterly baseless. A person may have acted in a rude way because they are struggling with something in their life, not because they are mean.

**Stick to the facts of the issue.** Any hint from the other person(s) that you are criticizing them as a person, or that their motives are bad; will stop any productive discussion dead.

**Truly listen.** Set aside your own defensiveness as best you can, and really listen to what others see as their facts on the issue. If there have been disagreements, things brought up can be overstated and sound unfairly accusatory. When you demonstrate that you have understood their viewpoints, there will be room for collaboration and/or compromise. Note that understanding their viewpoint is not the same as agreeing with it. If you are defensive, you cannot understand their viewpoint. Interrupting and thinking of retorts instead of listening are defensive maneuvers.

**Learn more about resolving conflicts.** Do some further reading (see options below) and/or contact VITAL WorkLife to speak with a consultant by phone in-the-moment or make an appointment for a face-to-face counseling session.

**Talk to the boss.** If your efforts to resolve the conflict with another employee is just not working out, it may be time to take it to the supervisor.

## We Can Help

You have access to unlimited in-the-moment telephonic support as part of our Employee Assistance Program with VITAL WorkLife. You also have access to face-to-face counseling. These resources are completely free and confidential and can help you positively and effectively handle conflict in the workplace. Contact us at **800.383.1908** to access your resources today. Your [Member Site](#) also has a variety of resources on workplace conflict and related topics:

### Articles:

- Keep Conflict Constructive
- A Better Way of Dealing With Conflict
- Resolving Conflict Constructively and Respectfully
- Cross Culture Communication
- Bridging Generation Gaps
- Communicating Effectively Between Generations
- Generations at Work
- How to Communicate with Cross Cultural Colleagues

**eLearning course (15-20 minutes)**

- Appreciating Personality Differences
- Effective Communication
- Cultural Diversity in the Workplace
- Say What You Mean the Right Way: Healthy Forms of Communication

**Online Seminars (1 hour)**

- Say What You Mean the Right Way: Healthy Forms of Communication
- Communication Skills for Collaboration
- You Make Me So Mad

*Sources:*

<sup>1</sup> Lytle, T. (2019, August 16). How to resolve workplace conflicts. Retrieved from <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/070815-conflict-management.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Rau-Foster, M. (2019). Conflict in the workplace: workplace issues. Retrieved from <https://www.workplaceissues.com/arconflict/>

<sup>3</sup> 5 types of conflict in the workplace and how to handle them. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.makeadentleadership.com/types-of-conflict-in-the-workplace.html>