

Conflict management

Many people feel uncomfortable with conflict but it can help us to develop. Here are eight tips for managing conflict more effectively.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. a monologue
2. defensive
3. to handle
4. to resolve
5. to bring up
6. to blame
7. constructive feedback
8. a perspective

Definitions

- a. to deal with or have responsibility for something
- b. to solve or end a problem
- c. advice and comments about your work that are useful and help to improve it
- d. a long speech by one person
- e. a way of seeing or thinking about something
- f. protecting yourself from being criticised or attacked
- g. to start talking about a particular topic
- h. to say or think that someone is responsible for something bad happening

Conflict management

Knowing how to handle conflict is an important professional skill. Conflict at work can affect the motivation and well-being of staff and create unnecessary distractions and stress. People with conflict management skills resolve disagreements quickly and effectively, enabling effective teamwork and maximum productivity. Successful conflict management also helps to create an atmosphere in which individuals can learn from others, develop their talents and think creatively. Conflict management can be challenging, but people who do it well are highly valued by their colleagues and companies.

Fight or flight

When conflict arises, we can often see nature's fight-or-flight response – either attacking the enemy or running away. The 'fight' reaction is when people start to prepare themselves for an argument. But by getting aggressive, they might not only damage their relationships but also miss the chance of growing through constructive feedback.

The 'flight' response involves ignoring the issue altogether. People suppress their feelings, hide disagreements and pretend that everything is fine when it is not. However, the conflict remains unresolved and the problem gets worse.

So how can we go beyond our immediate reactions to make conflict a source of trust-building and development? Here are eight tips to help us manage conflict successfully.

1. Consider the best time and place for the conversation.

While it is important to talk about the issue, doing it in the wrong place and in front of the wrong people can result in embarrassment and an inability to truly listen. If possible, make an appointment to sit down and talk through the issue with the people involved.

2. Assume positive intentions.

If you walk into a conversation assuming that you're not liked or that you're going to be attacked, you'll most likely spend that time defending yourself and feeling angry and hurt.

Remember that you're going through this process because people want to resolve the issue and get along. So start by assuming that their intentions are positive and that the things they are going to say are for the good of the team. This will allow for an open conversation that aims to improve the situation rather than make it worse.

3. Make sure it's a two-way conversation.

A conversation is not a monologue. It is not a chance for one party to list all the things they are angry and unhappy about without letting the other person react. A real conversation allows all parties to share their perspectives and collaborate to find a satisfactory way forward. If you find yourself in a monologue, stop and ask some questions.

4. Listen and be open to change.

Many of us think we listen but instead are simply waiting for our chance to respond. Put your thoughts aside for the moment and truly listen when the other person is speaking. Growth and development are only possible if you allow their words to change you.

5. Be specific about the issue and the impact.

It's easy to generalise and make broad accusations, for example using statements such as *You always ...* or *You never ...* However, this often results in a defensive response. Instead, be specific about what the issue is, give examples and be clear about the impact of the problem. Be as objective as you can and avoid personal attacks.

6. Don't bring up the past.

Some of us feel the need to bring up less relevant past events to gain an advantage over our conversation partner. This can make people feel defensive and distract everyone from the

main point of the conversation. Try to focus on the main issue and how to make things better.

7. Take responsibility for your part in the problem.

We are not perfect and we make mistakes. Consider how you might have contributed to the problem and take responsibility for it. This not only demonstrates your desire to work as a team but also shows that you are not just looking for an opportunity to blame the other party.

8. Focus on the future.

Conversations about conflict are often focused on what shouldn't have been and what could have been done. Instead, focus on the future. What steps can you take to resolve the problem? How can you avoid this happening again?

With careful management, conflicts can help us make the most of our differences and find a way of working together successfully.

Tasks

Task 1

Circle the correct option to complete the sentences.

1. Conflict at work can ...
 - a. make people feel negative and stressed.
 - b. help staff develop.
 - c. be difficult to manage.
 - d. All of the above.

2. People who choose to maintain the peace and 'fly' from conflict tend to ...
 - a. get defensive.
 - b. not resolve the conflict.
 - c. openly deny any accusations.
 - d. manage the conflict well.

3. By making an appointment to discuss the issue, we can ...
 - a. avoid involving people who do not need to be a part of it.
 - b. choose a time when all parties feel angriest with each other.
 - c. choose a place where there are soft cushions so that no one will get hurt if a fight breaks out.
 - d. prepare our attack in advance and bring all the evidence we need.

4. When managing conflict, the writer suggests that we should ...
 - a. bring up the issue whenever we start to feel angry about it.
 - b. focus on talking about and elaborating our own perspective on the problem.
 - c. believe that people have good intentions and want the best for everyone.
 - d. arm ourselves with lots of examples of things the other person has done wrong in the past.

5. According to the advice in the article, we should say things like ...
 - a. 'You never offer any help.'
 - b. 'What you did made Paul feel undervalued.'
 - c. 'I've heard you're a very negative person and now I see it's true.'
 - d. 'I don't want to hear your side of the story. I already know it.'

6. By taking responsibility for our part in the problem, we can ...
 - a. show that we are perfect.
 - b. blame ourselves before they blame us.
 - c. pretend to share the blame and avoid the real issue.
 - d. show that we value teamwork and collaboration.

Task 2

Are the sentences true or false?

	Answer	
1. Employers don't realise that conflict management skills are useful.	True	False
2. When faced with conflict, it is natural to want to run away or to get ready for battle.	True	False
3. When we choose between 'fight' or 'flight', they can both result in a lost opportunity to make things better.	True	False
4. It is best to start dealing with conflict immediately, without worrying too much about the time and place.	True	False
5. Many people who say they are listening are in fact thinking of what they are going to say in reply.	True	False
6. Focusing on examples of the other person's wrongdoing helps to resolve conflict.	True	False

Discussion

How do you normally deal with conflict at work? Do you have any tips?