

# Have a Conflict Resolution Strategy

Interpersonal conflict on a work team can be quite uncomfortable. Misunderstandings, hurt feelings and resentments can sometimes poison the work environment and get in the way of productivity. What can be done when disagreements start to hurt the team?

You might be tempted to ask, “Can’t we all just get along?” However, some conflict in the workplace is unavoidable. It’s a natural part of getting things done in a group setting. When conflicts occur, however, it’s important as a manager to address them in a constructive way. It’s best to actively curtail personal attacks and keep the discussions focused on workplace issues that can be solved logically.

In this issue of *Your Source*, we take a look at:

- Ways to expect and be ready for a certain amount of team conflict.
- How to develop a strategy for managing conflicts through respectful dialogue, brainstorming for solutions, and group acceptance so that everyone can win.
- Specific techniques you can employ to keep your conflict resolution efforts on track.

When you’re looking for ideas on how to address a workplace conflict situation, remember that your program offers telephonic access to professional workplace consultants. Our management consultation specialists can help you solidify your strategy and be more confident in addressing difficult issues.



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***Unless both sides  
win, no agreement  
can be permanent.***

*– Jimmy Carter*

## Anticipate Conflict and Move Forward

It’s virtually impossible to pursue and achieve an organization’s work objectives without some disagreement about how things should be done. Similarly, individuals may object to the behavior or performance of others, resulting in interpersonal difficulties that can impact the team. Being prepared for these inevitable conflicts can be a healthy strategy for a leader.

- Although conflict can arise at any time, you can expect it more often when your team is experiencing high levels of stress, such as when the current workload is heavy.
- It can be tempting to brush conflicts aside in an effort to keep the peace, hoping that they will resolve themselves. But if they aren’t addressed, conflicts can fester, leading to increased tension and work disruption.
- Spotting conflicts and implementing a resolution strategy early, rather than later on, can keep disagreements from escalating and becoming more complex.
- While you can’t stop disagreements from occurring, you can learn to use conflicts as assets. Long-simmering misunderstandings can be addressed and resolved, leading to better long-term team cohesion.
- Open, unbiased communication with the team is vital as you approach a conflict situation.



**Log on here!**

# Resolving Conflicts on Your Team

Although it's often not pleasant, conflict is sometimes an important part of group development. Confronting and working through conflict can end up generating new solutions and making the team stronger.

## Take Your Time and Address Issues Neutrally

Sometimes you can get blindsided by an unexpected conflict situation. If this happens, take some time to compose your thoughts. Tell the others involved that you'll meet with them shortly. Then convene a meeting at a neutral location. Don't necessarily agree to meet individually with differing parties; this can put you in the position of judge rather than solution facilitator.



## Establish a Safe Environment

Let the team know that you expect an open forum where disagreement is expressed honestly and no one is attacked personally. If conflicts become personal or emotional, interrupt the process. Remind team members to focus on resolving work issues, not assigning blame to others or “winning” a battle.

## Strive to Listen and Understand

Ask questions to help identify the true source of the conflict. Restate your understanding of each person's point of view and ask others to verify your interpretation of the issues. Ask group members to add to your summary if necessary.

## Brainstorm for Win-Win Solutions

Encourage any and all possible ideas to help solve problems for the group. When individuals make suggestions, don't judge the ideas as good or bad. Instead, evaluate, compare and synthesize the different options to formulate a solution that can best meet everyone's needs. Confirm that everyone understands the solution. The team's mutual agreement on a way forward will work better than if team members are simply instructed to do something.

## Monitor the Solution

Once an agreed-upon solution to the conflict is implemented, let everyone know that you'll track its effectiveness within a specific timeframe. Be flexible and make changes to the plan as needed.

## Now That's An Idea!

### **Manage Conflicts, Minimize Damage**

*See yourself as a facilitator*—As a leader, it's your role to set the ground rules for discussion and not take sides in a disagreement. Always act in service of the team.

*Depersonalize conflicts*—Try to keep everyone focused on the problems and their potential solutions, not on people. “Us versus them” is not nearly as effective as “us versus the problem.”

*Insist on respectful behavior*—Remind participants to control their emotions and treat others as they would like to be treated.

*Use positive language*—Express confidence in your team that a workable solution is reachable.

*Act quickly if conflict becomes harassment.* If a problem appears driven by gender, race or sexual orientation issues, intervene immediately. Ask for help from your human resources department.

*Call on the experts*—Consult with your program's workplace support specialists for expert, confidential advice on addressing conflicts.

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