

Resolving Conflict

Written by Sandra D'AMICO

"Resolving conflict at work" / "Coping with conflict at work"

By Sean Power and Sandra D'Amico



At times, the work environment can be stressful. Given the pressures of work, and the different types of personalities that mix together at work, it is perhaps not surprising that people occasionally experience some level of conflict with one of their work colleagues. In extreme cases, this conflict can be very stressful for those involved, and can even result in family troubles. For the organisation, it can lead to poor staff morale, high staff turnover and lower productivity.

We cannot avoid conflict

Conflict will occur at some point in time. This does not mean, however, that conflict cannot be managed and resolved. We can limit workplace conflicts by understanding the reasons why conflicts occur, identifying small conflicts before they turn into bigger ones and using proven techniques for resolving conflicts.

Social Differences: We are all Different!

There are so many potential sources of conflict at work. For starters, people can have very different ideas about what language and behaviour is appropriate. In a country as diverse as

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Cambodia, there are many cultural differences relating to ethnic background, religion, social status, home province, age and gender. In addition, work brings together people with very different personalities - shy or outspoken, timid or aggressive, serious or fun-loving, and team-oriented or individualistic.

People also have different values, both personal and professional. Some people are very status-conscious and believe that high status should command respect and obedience, without question. Others believe that all people are essentially equal and that everyone's views should be taken into account when making decisions.

As a result of all these personal differences and perceptions, certain language or behaviour that seems perfectly appropriate to one person might be highly offensive to others. Try to understand and respect these differences. Take a few minutes to think from the perspectives of other people. What motivates them? What is important to them?

Professional rivalry: responsibility, performance, promotion

Other sources of conflict relate to the actual work situation. A common flashpoint is jealousy or rivalry regarding salaries, promotions or work allocations. Conflict can also arise over disagreements about who is responsible for group successes or failures. Understandably, an employee and their manager will sometimes have different opinions about how well the employee is performing. These tensions can quickly degenerate into vindictive and destructive office gossip, which can spiral out of control.

It is important that managers acknowledge the successes of teams and individuals, publically and individually. Employees should also be aware that their manager is responsible for accepting successes on behalf of the team. The manager or leader is the "front" of the team and as such, has the responsibility for accepting both the good and bad of the team in an appropriate manner.

Unseen Causes of Conflict

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A final source of conflict is deliberate workplace intimidation or harassment, including sexual harassment. This can have devastating consequences for the victim of this abuse. Organisations should make it absolutely clear to everyone that this type of behaviour will not be tolerated.

From Conflict to Change Management

There are several things that organisations can do to avoid conflicts arising in the first place. A good start is to have clear procedures in place for things like recruitment, promotion and performance evaluation. Policies on sexual harassment, professional conduct and appropriate use of email will ensure that everyone knows what is expected of them. In addition, staff satisfaction surveys can act as an "early warning system" to alert senior management to potential conflicts.

Senior managers should also look for ways to encourage team bonding and to improve staff morale. Regular lunches or social activities can help people get to know each other at a personal level. Good communication across all levels of an organisation can also help to prevent misunderstandings and encourage a unity of purpose.

Once conflicts actually emerge, try to resolve things before they grow into something more serious. Perhaps seek advice from family or friends. The right approach will depend on the circumstances. It might be better to simply "agree to disagree" and leave the issue alone. More likely, you will need to discuss the issue with the other person. Try to do this in a non-combative style - perhaps over a coffee or a lunch. Make sure you listen to their point of view, rather than try to "win the argument". In almost all situations, a face-to-face discussion will be most productive. While emails allow you to choose your words carefully - and give the other person time to think before responding - there is a big risk that your words will be misinterpreted. A small criticism can look very aggressive in an email.

If this approach doesn't work, then you may need to seek the help of a third party. Usually, the most appropriate starting point will be your manager. However, if your conflict is actually *with* your manager, then try the HR Manager or another senior manager. Once again, try to keep things informal and low-key, at least in the first instance.

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If there is still no resolution, there may be a need to escalate the dispute. In larger organisations, there might be formal dispute resolution mechanisms. In smaller organisations, your only course of action might be to report the problem to a senior manager or even the managing director.

Organisations - whether big or small - should think about the best ways to handle conflicts in their workplace. One good initiative is to implement a mentor system, where each staff member is allocated somebody who they can go to for advice. Staff should know who they can approach in any situation. In response to a particular conflict, there may be a case for pro-active interventions such as anger management and stress management courses, or even psychiatric counseling.

Finally, it is worth remembering that in any workplace conflict, there are no real winners. Everybody loses in the end. Most importantly, your attitude to resolving the conflict is most important. Start out with agreeing to disagree and you will see that conflicts can often turn into constructive debates.

This article was written by Sean Power (consultant to HRINC) and Sandra D'Amico, Managing Director of HRINC, Cambodia's leading HR services firm.

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