



Managing Conflict in Your Team

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Today we're talking about managing conflict in your team. Conflict is a clash of interest, opinions, or principles. In any place where people are working together, conflict is normal and natural. Unfortunately, though, it tends to lower the team morale, increase absenteeism, and decrease productivity.

A 2008 survey by CPP Global found that 85% of both individual contributors and leaders agreed they experienced some amount of inevitable conflict at work. 29% of all employees said that they experienced almost constant conflict. Indeed, a similar study from 2020 in the UK found that 26% of people felt conflict was a common occurrence at work. You **will** run into it at work, and as a manager, you'll be responsible for guiding reports through a dispute. In fact, 29% of respondents to the CPP Global survey cited poor leadership as a source of conflict, so it's essential for managers to take accountability, and learn to build inclusive team cultures based on prevention.

By the end of this recording, you will understand more about conflict, and how to deal with it tactfully, professionally, and constructively. You'll also learn ways to prevent unnecessary conflicts before they arise.

As a manager, resolving conflict within your team is challenging, but to run a team with a positive, respectful environment, it should not be left unchecked. Avoiding conflict is generally unproductive and can result in frustration, tension and even people taking sick leave to avoid the short-term difficulties involved with directly addressing a situation.

Getting an initial understanding of a conflict is essential to resolving it. You need to know if the root cause is something beyond your remit - a discrimination or harassment issue, for example, which you will need to communicate to your company's HR department. If you aren't already, you should familiarise yourself with company policies.

If the root cause *does* fall within your remit, you may quickly see an opportunity to diffuse a situation. Suppose there is a clear feeling of tension in a call your entire team joins to begin the day. Your reports end up quarreling as one is waiting for some work from another before they can wrap up a project, but a deadline is looming large. The other feels they simply don't have the capacity to do what's being requested. A quick, easy solution would be to step in and extend the deadline if you can make that call.

But what if it is more serious? Sometimes employees are like oil and water - they just don't get along naturally, and it leads to clashes. Occasionally, it can lead to a dynamic where one of the employees feels bullied at work. You have to nip it in the bud. Doing so will spare the victim and potentially also the aggressor from a lot of upset. According to the 2020 CIPD report, 'even a minor disagreement between people can fester and escalate if it's not addressed and resolved at the earliest opportunity.' Addressing the issue early will also prevent other employees from being dragged in and save the company from damage to reputation or even potential liability. If you intervene early and effectively, you might just save an otherwise doomed relationship.

However, it's also essential to know when not to intervene. You aren't a parent or teacher. It's not going to be manageable for you to be the peacemaker all the time - instead, you should be looking only to facilitate constructive discussions.

When you become aware of a conflict, assess it with the information you have - deal only with facts, at first. If appropriate, let the affected parties know that you are aware, and ask if they'd feel comfortable attempting to deal with the situation one-on-one.

But what happens when an employee reports that they feel offended or disrespected by someone's comments, and a one-on-one simply exacerbates the situation?

In these situations, it is about the perception, not the intention. You will need to get ahead of this, fast. Perhaps one identifies themselves as 'frank', or 'straightspoken', but another colleague has felt hurt, or even bullied as a result of this communication style. Step in to remind the accused that regardless of how they meant to behave, the result was that the victim was left upset, and therefore they will need to amend their behaviour moving forward. If this isn't the first occurrence, then it's time for you to take more formal steps - either reporting to HR or, if you don't have a dedicated HR team, working with the appropriate colleague on the right disciplinary procedure. As tempting as it can feel to put these scenarios down to differences in character, it will erode the trust and respect your people have for you and your leadership. It's imperative to take action.

Sometimes, though, it's not communication styles at the centre of a conflict. Two people can simply disagree on an approach, and eventually it results in butting heads. But resolving conflict doesn't always mean getting people to agree, and striving for that would be unwise. Respectfully agreeing to disagree is a perfectly suitable outcome - it is the respect that matters most. If employees acknowledge a difference of opinion or approach, you can step in to make a decision, and the two can work on moving forward productively.

Another important part of managing conflict is equal treatment. It's vital that all parties are and feel as though they have been properly listened to. You must cast aside rumour and work with the facts as they're laid out by those involved. It's then essential that the results of any attempted resolution are in line with company policy and history. If you have an employee handbook, it should be your best friend. Either way, you must remain objective and not appear to take sides. A quarter (24%) of employees think challenging issues such as bullying and harassment are swept under the carpet in their organisation. It can be easy to let things slide as a manager, but it will inevitably hurt in the long term. By letting one party 'get away' with something, your position of authority will be weakened, and it's likely that you'll lose respect, and these run-ins will become more frequent.

The final step is to document everything. If a conflict has occurred via email, keep a record of those emails. The notes taken in any mediation should be filed. This way, you can easily spot a pattern of misconduct, and you have all of the information you need to pursue further action and will be protected against any legal challenges.

We often see conflict resolution as a terrifying proposition. We'll do whatever we can to avoid it. But remember - being a great leader takes courage. The best managers are those who are brave enough to address workplace issues and support your team appropriately where necessary.

If you are seen as somebody who treats his or her reports with respect and fairness, then people will want to work for you, and they'll work together well. If you want to foster a culture of integrity, it starts with your leadership.

Consistency is key when dealing with delicate situations like conflict in your team. Being very aware of how your company deals with conflict will help you stay on the right side of things. So spend some time familiarising yourself with your company's policies. If they don't exist, ask why not!

That's all for today. Thanks for listening and remember: keep building the best you.

Reading List

- **[Podcast]** What's Your Problem with Workplace Conflict?, The HR Podcast.
- **[Podcast]** Shifting the Perception of Workplace Conflict, CIPD.
- **[Article]** Workplace Conflict: Statistics That Reveal Its Cost, Centre for Management and Organizational Effectiveness.
- **[Article]** Managing Conflict in the Modern Workplace, CIPD.