

# Managing conflict in the workplace



**Conflict in the workplace is a challenge which, if unmanaged or managed poorly, can be detrimental to individuals and organisations. However, if managed well, conflict resolution can produce extremely positive results that can spur on personal and organisational development.**

Firstly it must be understood that disharmony, dispute and conflict is normal, where there are people there will be circumstances where conflict arises from time to time. What is important is how it's managed.

Although there are several types of conflict, there are three which are more common in the workplace:

**Relationship Conflict** – this is a personal perspective that can arise when one person behaves in a negative manner, or another person has skewed perception due to things such as stereotypes and rumours.

**Value Conflict** – this arises when two people or groups have differing views on moral values.

**Interest Conflict** – this arises when one person's desired outcome is in conflict with another person or group's interests.



**35% of UK employees** report some form of interpersonal conflict at work, either an isolated dispute or incident of conflict and/or an ongoing difficult relationship



**9% of cases of conflict** lead to sickness absence



**19% of cases of conflict** lead to reduced work productivity



**One in ten cases of conflict** results in one or other party leaving their organisation or moving job whether this be resignation or dismissal

## Tips for managing conflict

- Put in place an open-door policy.
- Promote differences and diversity.
- Have a conflict risk assessment process and policy.
- Consider that the issue is the problem not the people.
- Encourage a discussion, debate and discourage personal attacks.
- Actively manage negative conflict and disputes using best practice and ensuring that managers have the appropriate skills.

## Causes

Understanding why a conflict is happening is just as important as understanding what type of conflict it is.

### Poor communication

either verbal or non-verbal can be a real cause for conflict in the workplace. This is due to misunderstandings, lack of clarity, variations in communication styles and inappropriate responses.



### Clashes in personality

can also have negative effects, including an inability for compromise and lack of acceptance between team members.



### Inadequate resources

can lead to frustration and irritability between team members, this in turn can then be a driver towards poor performance and conflict.



### Misalignment of expectations

and goals between team members, team leaders and managers can also be cause for conflict and result in a breakdown of relationships.



## Impacts on the individual

The impact of conflict will be different from person to person but may include:

- development of a negative attitude/poor behaviour
- struggling to maintain positive relationships with clients, suppliers, customers and colleagues
- various negative indicators of well-being such as depressive symptoms, job dissatisfaction and physical symptoms
- a reduction in motivation and commitment
- a decline in productivity or relationships which could lead to the situation being untenable.
- one or other party leaving their organisation or moving job (whether this be resignation or dismissal).

## Impacts on the workplace

- Disharmonious employees can seriously affect a company's reputation, which can be the difference between success and failure.
- A contented, engaged workforce is attractive and displays confidence whereas a discontented individual/department or workforce is oppressive and can influence customer behaviour.
- Poor service or observing a 'blame culture' for example, can leave customers feeling awkward and disappointed which can lead to complaints and reputational damage.
- Productivity is negatively affected during workplace conflict, causing financial impact which may be small but nevertheless significant.



## How to manage conflict

**Be proactive – The worst thing to do is nothing! The majority of situations benefit from intervention in the form of conflict resolution.**

Conflict resolution is most effective when based on reasonableness, but it should be understood that resolution will vary based on the skills of the person facilitating, as well as the engagement from those involved.

**It is important for the facilitator of the resolution to:**

- stay neutral, avoiding personal judgements
- be calm, if you are calm others will mirror this
- be interested and avoid distractions when dealing with conflict
- be confident, open and honest
- avoid making promises.

### Sources

Acas advisory handbook – Discipline and grievances at work – the Acas guide  
<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2179>

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<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=663>

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<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/relationships.htm>

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## Tips for conflict resolution to consider:

- Allow people to vent, but set boundaries around language and behaviour.
- Enable individuals to get to the point about their issue by asking them to prioritise in order the things that are causing them upset.
- Seek compromise. Offer acceptance by giving space when they talk but setting expectations of what might and might not be possible.

## Prevention is better than cure!

The following methods can be used to help prevent or mitigate the negative impacts of conflict:

**Clear policies and procedures around employee conduct** – ensuring all employees are aware of the boundaries, and how to raise concerns/report unreasonable behaviour.

**Lines of communication must remain open and transparent** – any issues can then be dealt quickly before escalating into inflammatory situations.

**Encourage and create an inclusive workplace culture** – with the ethos of dignity and respect.

**Conflict management training for managers and supervisors** – in order to identify risks and manage any conflicts at workplace.

**A structured appraisal system with regular reviews** – to ensure that employees have appropriate feedback and support for career progression.

## Organisational checklist

- It's most important to train and support managers to handle difficult conversations with employees. People management is a skill and does not always come easy to managers who have great technical ability but limited experience with people.
- Have clear discipline, grievance and dispute procedures for dealing with conflict.
- Focus on best interests not positions and personalities.
- Consider outside help where conflicts and disputes become entrenched.
- Consider how harmonious your organisational culture is. Is there room for improvement?



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