

Resolving Conflict Without Punching Someone Out

By Dianna Booher

Conflicts are inevitable. But everyday problems can be conquered so relationships are built, not opportunities lost.

People who never experience conflict on the job are either living in a dream world, blind to their surroundings, or in solitary confinement! Because whenever two or three are gathered in any community for any reason at any time, there will inevitably be some form or degree of dissension, difficulty, or difference of opinion.

Conflicts just happen.

They can result from excellent work or poor work, from good intentions or evil intentions, from appropriate behavior or inappropriate behavior. Because people come from such divergent experiences and backgrounds, think and reason so differently from one another, and communicate so uniquely, conflicts are not only possible but highly probable.

When the inevitable conflict surfaces, we need to deal with it so that it doesn't drain our energy, infect our whole life, and sabotage our effectiveness.

Deal with Conflict Promptly

Regardless of the size or scope of the problem, the first step in conflict management is simply to deal with it. Certainly the most extensive and pressing confrontations cry loudest for our attention, but many a mountain is merely the consequence of a molehill left unattended. They all must be dealt with.

Remember two key concepts here: sensitivity and willingness to resolve the situation. Those who have their eyes, ears, and minds open will see what others don't—or won't. Having a good sense of your surroundings and associates is the best way to recognize when and how conflicts arise.

A willingness to act intelligently and decisively is equally important. While many are content to watch, wait, and wonder, effective professionals get involved. They solve problems rather than let them simmer.

Determine the Nature of the Conflict

For the most part, conflicts can be divided into five categories. Identify them correctly and you heal the wound. Misdiagnose them and you allow the disease to spread.

Conflicts over personalities may occur because John is an introverted accountant from New York, Jane is an extroverted publicist from LA, and Sara is a sometimes introverted, sometimes extroverted office manager from Dallas. Even those with similar backgrounds and experiences have conflicts because of personal habits and idiosyncrasies.

Conflicts over goals occur when dedicated and driven professionals pursuing certain objectives run headlong into other dedicated and driven professionals pursuing other objectives.

Conflicts over values are the most difficult to resolve. The difference between attitudes and values is generally time. Values have taken root in a person's life and spread with vigor.

Conflicts over circumstances occur when, for example, two employees want to take vacation the same week and both can't be gone at the same time without serious workflow problems.

Conflicts over facts involve differences in sources, authorities, and definitions.

Determine the Method of Solving

Once you've categorized the kind of conflict staring you in the face, you'll have a clear understanding about the effort involved in resolving it and the potential for a successful resolution. Some will be quick; some will be never-ending. Plan your future actions and reactions accordingly.

Accommodation is used when you yield to the other person's plans. This is a good strategy when the issue is important to them and relatively unimportant to you, when you cannot win or are wrong, when you want to bank a favor for later, or when harmony is more important than the issue.

Compromise is the process of melding both parties' desires into an equally agreeable alternative. Use this method when the issue is important to both of you but not worth fighting to the bitter end, when the situation is temporary and will lead to a quick fix, or when you don't have time to haggle but need to meet some of your goals.

Overpowering the other person to get your way is another option. Though sometimes seen as aggressive and domineering, this strategy can be effective and appropriate. This strategy is best used when the situation is an emergency and you have to act quickly. You may have to play the part of statesman and enforce unpopular principles or take unpopular actions for a higher good or goal.

Collaboration—joining forces with the other and working things out—is a final strategy. Make the effort and take the time to collaborate when the relationship is long-term and the situation will be recurring, when both goals are too important to compromise, or when you need buy-in from both people on the outcome.

Creating a culture of conflict awareness and resolution is essential to effective business communications and productivity. Knowing how to identify and solve problems will determine whether you're an effective manager of inevitable conflict or one who leaves behind a trail of muddled opportunities and broken relationships.

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For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.