
Conflict Resolution

Negotiations between people is a basic means of getting what you want. It is back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement when you and the other side have some interests that are shared and some that are opposed. It is important to have good conflict resolutions skills.

Positive conflict resolution can be judged by three criteria:

- Produces a wise agreement, one that meets both interests of each side to the extent possible.
- Improves a relationship or at least not damage it
- Is efficient

But when you argue over positions, in conflict, it produces:

- Unwise agreements
- Is inefficient
- Endangers an ongoing relationship

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Task or Value Conflicts. Conflict that is around a particular task, differing ideas, the way a decision is made, or differing views on how to approach a situation. It can also be different ways of life, ideology, worldview or differing criteria for evaluating ideas.

Relationship Conflict. Based on conflict with another person(s) involving differences of opinion, attitude, or personal styles. This is usually related to task conflict. This centers on miscommunication, strong emotions and repetitive negative behaviors.

Process or Interest Conflicts. This conflict is centered around the delegation or logistics of how a task will be completed. It is also about who is responsible for what. Perceived or actual competition over interests or procedural/psychological interests. This most commonly is related to relationship conflict.

Status or Structural Conflicts. This is embedded in an organization around who is on top of the social hierarchy, leading to power struggles over decision-making resources. This conflict is also about unequal authority. Unequal control of resources and time constraints.

Organizational or Data Conflicts. This emerges from the organization as a whole. It is often tied to lack of communication or miscommunication, absence of shared visions (real or perceived), and different values.

HARD AND SOFT TYPES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTIONS

There are 3 different ways that conflict can be resolved, they are:

Hard conflict resolutions are those resolutions that the person dominates the conversation. They insist on concessions and make threats, real or implied, if they do not get their way.

Soft conflict resolutions emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining a relationship. The process tends to be more forthcoming and an agreement becomes highly likely.

Positional conflict resolution looks at resolving conflict in 2 basic steps: the first is addressing the issue at hand and the second is on the procedure to deal with it. Using positional conflict resolution means separating the people from the problem, focusing on interests and not positions, invent options for mutual gain, and insist on using objective criteria.

MOVING FORWARD IN RESOLVING CONFLICT

There are a few “simple” steps in conflict resolution. The first is to avoid misunderstandings which can reinforce prejudices and lead to reactions that produce counterreactions. It then becomes a vicious circle where conflict is impossible to resolve. Secondly, it takes practice! Conflict resolution does not come naturally. When we have a vested interest in the outcome, we tend to take things personally rather than looking at a “problem” objectively. Other resolution skills are:

Understanding Perceptions. Another way to continue to avoid conflict is to start to understand other’s perceptions. By learning how they think about the problem can help reach a resolution to a conflict. Walking in one’s shoes for a while, will help you understand empathetically the power of their point of view and to feel the emotional force with which they believe in it. Don’t deduce their intentions from your fears. Do not assume that whatever you fear the other will do.

- ***Don’t blame them for your problems.*** Others are not responsible for your issues. When you blame the others it is counterproductive and will not end the conflict.
- ***Discuss each other’s perceptions.*** It is helpful then to have meaningful conversations regarding these perceptions.
- ***Look for inconsistencies with their perceptions.*** Sometimes it is best to send a message that is opposite of what another expects, to change what they believe.
- ***Give them a stake*** in the outcome by making sure they participate in the process.
- ***Face-Saving.*** Conflict resolution is not a time to tear someone down or have them feel like their thoughts, feelings, and ideas are invalid. Ensure that you are able to reflect a person’s need to reconcile the stand they take during the process.

Acknowledge Emotions. It is important part of any conflict resolution to acknowledge the emotions as they appear. Sometimes they are more powerful than what is actually being said.

- ***Recognize and understand everyone’s emotions.*** If needed write them down as you are in your meeting. What is driving everyone’s emotions?
- ***Allow the other side to let off steam.*** Allow everyone to take an uninterrupted turn to let off some **HEALTHY** steam. This should not be a personal attack on each of the sides, but necessary to get past some of the negative emotions that might be building.
- ***Don’t react to emotional outburst.*** Do not take it personally as, in above, they are letting off some steam to get rid of those negative emotions.
- ***Use symbolic gestures.*** These are gestures that are universally known to end a conflict – an apology, a hand-shake, etc.

Communication. Communication is paramount to any resolution. You cannot have a conversation if one or more of the parties refuses to talk. When communicating to each other ensure that you are actively listening to each other. It is important, even when you feel that you are no longer being heard. Secondly it is important, again, to actively listen to the other person and not think about what you are going to say. Finally it is also important that you be direct and concise to avoid any miscommunication.

- **So what is “actively listening”?** It is the process of listening to not just the words that others are saying, but also looking at non-verbal language. It allows one to start to understand another’s perceptions, emotions, and what they are trying to say. In actively listening you ask for clarification of what the other party said. This two-way type of communication can help with feeling like both sides are actually being heard.
- **Speak to be understood.** Communication in trying to resolve conflict is not a debate. This is NOT the time to blame, name-call or raise your voice to another.
- **Speak about yourself, not about them.** Use “I” statements to take the “blame” from the other, which puts them on defense, to how the conflict has affected you.

Knowing Prevention Works Best. If you can prevent misunderstanding in the first place, it will help conflicts resolve quickly. Those that have an invested interest in their relationship tend to resolve difficulties quickly and peacefully.

- **Build a working relationship.** Getting to know each other is the best way to prevent a conflict. When a conflict then arises, you have the basis to be able to resolve disagreements quickly.
- **Face the issue not the person.** Prevent egos coming into play when the personalities (people) are taken out of the equation and the “issue” is talked about. This is not something that is easily done and needs to be practiced.

Reconcile interests not positions. Look for what is common in the conflict that both sides do not want to give up. Every interest defines the problem. When you define the interest rather than the problem you can find several different resolutions that will meet both needs rather than just the one(s) on the table.

- **Ask the “why’s”.** The first “why” is to put yourself in their shoes. The next “why” is there is conflict. What is causing the “stop” and how can one move closer to a resolution.
- **Realize there are multiple interests.** For every conflict there are many different interests involved, not just the one on the table. During this time those in conflict not only have a strong interest in affecting an agreement but also effecting the outcome.
- **Basic human needs are the most powerful.** Basic human needs include security, economic wellbeing, a sense of belonging, recognition, and control over one’s life. If the conflict is due to one of these being perceived in “danger”, conflict will arise. When trying to resolve a conflict investigate whether or not the conflict stems from either a real or perceived threat to one’s basic human need.
- **Talking about common interests.** This helps provide common ground for both parties when trying to resolve conflict.
- **Make your interests come alive.** Be specific about with concrete details that impact what is being said. Do not minimize another’s interests. These are just as important than yours.

- **Acknowledge that each other's interests may be part of the problem.** We tend to pay too little interest in others needs and in acknowledging that our needs may be part of the issue and that you understand their interests, tends to lead better listening.

Put the problem before the answer. Address the problem prior to your answer to ensure that it everything is clear. This also helps take the “person” out of the equation.

- **Look forward, not back.** This is something that typically happens when in conflict. We bring up the past rather than moving forward. If there is a need to dwell on the past, then chances are that the previous conflict was not resolved. This will hinder moving forward . It deters from resolving future conflicts because you will have to resolve the past issues prior to moving forward. It breaks down the process, builds mistrust, and it will make it harder to move forward in trying to reach some type of resolution.
- **Be concrete, but flexible.** Know where you stand but allow yourself to be open to new ideas. Have options for settling the conflict.

Diagnosing the Problem. Conflicts can usually be broken down into 4 basic obstacles. If you can reach consensus on these, a resolution can be easier to reach.

- **Premature judgement.** Here is where practice in conflict resolution will come in handy. Inventing options does not come naturally, especially if we are “stuck” with our “optimal” option. When emotions run high it is also not the time we tend to be our most creative. We feel pressured to “think outside the box” on a moments notice rather than putting some thought into it.
- **Searching for a single answer.** When we are trying to resolve a conflict, we tend to narrow our vision towards a single path towards that ultimate goal. When we are searching for that “single answer” we lose sight of the bigger picture and can miss out on different options that will reap better results.
- **Assumption of a fixed pie.** The assumption of the pie is really looking at conflict resolution as the “either or” solution. Conflict resolution cannot be about “either I get what I want or you do.”
- **“Solving their problem is THEIR problem.”** When we are trying to resolve conflict, we need to be open about trying to satisfy both sides not just one or the other. Solving the issue is about both sides coming together.

Prescription. During this phase we start to look at ways we can reach a mutual beneficial agreement by:

- **Separate inventing from deciding.** Essentially this is the “brainstorming” session of conflict resolution. As stated before, creativity during times of stress is not “natural” and takes practice, but brainstorming solutions, prior to deciding the resolution, can help that process become clearer.
 - Prior to setting up a brainstorm session, you should take these few steps.
 - Define the purpose.
 - Choose a few participants, if possible.
 - Change the environment to a “neutral “one.
 - Design the session to be informal.
 - Choose a facilitator to keep focus on the session.

- Beginning the brainstorming session:
 - Seat the participants side-by-side facing the problem/issue. They can also be sitting in a circle. There should be no “head” or “foot” or “front” or “back”.
 - Clarify ground rules, including there is no “dumb” idea.
 - Brainstorm all ideas, get everyone participating to give at least one idea.
 - Record **ALL** ideas.
- Ending the brainstorming session.
 - Star the most promising solution, one that can be mutually beneficial to all parties.
 - Invent ways to make that promising solution even better.
 - Set up a time to meet and re-evaluate the idea and then decide.
 - Broaden options rather than look at a single answer.
 - Search for mutual benefits.
 - Invent ideas to make decisions easier.

Broaden your options. During this phase of conflict resolution it is still important to continue to look for as many options as you can and not to narrow it down to one “right” answer. One idea is to create a “Circle Chart” (see below).



Look for mutual gain. In conflict resolution, it is always good to look for mutual gain. Where it becomes a “win-win” for both parties involved. Sometimes that cannot be reached, then what?

- **Do not attack their position/person.** Look beyond that and try to see their point (perceptions).
- **Don't defend yourself, invite criticism and advice.** Instead of looking at another's critical issue, ask them why it is felt that way? What would be their solution if it does not match yours?
- **DO NOT attack** the other side, even if it feels like they are attacking you. Resist and do not defend you position. Listen to them, show that you understand, by paraphrasing what they are saying back to them.
- **Ask questions and then pause.** Do not respond right way after they answer your question. Take time to take a deep breath; pause, to get emotions under control prior to answering.
- **Practice!** Resolving conflict can be deeply personal, whether in the workplace or personal life, and resolving conflict does not necessarily come naturally. The more you practice these techniques the better you will be prepared when the time comes that you are either, in conflict and need to resolve it, or have been asked to come in and resolve some type of conflict.

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Conflict Resolution Plan

These questions will help you create a plan, gather your thoughts, emotions, and expected results when trying to resolve conflict.

1. Specific Conflict:

- a. Is this a role, process, interpersonal, direction, or external conflict? _____

- b. People Involved (yourself, co-worker, supervisor, others?):

- c. What may be their needs or perceptions? _____

2. Create a Plan of Action:

- a. Do not personalize the discussion.
- b. Build a consensus by building a solution together.
- c. Choose specific strategies to resolve the conflict.
- d. Use the process of “brainstorming” to list potential solutions.

3. Write down what results you would like to see:

- a. Consider more than one option, then try both, one after another.
- b. Other approaches – see common ground and if stuck go back to brainstorming.
- c. Ask – does this solve the problem?
- d. Is this a “win-win” solution?
- e. Do we need to address other concerns?

4. Who will help ensure continuation of the Plan of Action:

- a. Co-worker?
- b. Supervisor?
- c. Family?
- d. Friend?