



## Culture and conflict

Workplace conflicts are not necessarily bad. In fact, healthy conflicts can bring people together to create new products and services, improve processes, and resolve problems. However, unhealthy conflicts weaken relationships and have a negative impact on productivity, morale, retention, and collaboration. These kinds of conflicts rarely resolve themselves and it is usually left to managers to intervene before they get worse.

### The role of culture

The first step to managing any unhealthy workplace conflict is to recognize that culture is often a factor.

Our culture influences every aspect of our lives. It defines how we perceive the world and ourselves, our perception of time, and how we interact with others. Differences can be significant and in the workplace can inadvertently cause misunderstandings, frustrations, and errors.

This is most evident when people from what are called high and low context cultures interact. High context cultures place importance on long-term relationships and loyalty. A great deal of information is provided non-verbally through gestures, silences, facial expressions, and body language, and there are unwritten rules of conduct that can be difficult for newcomers to master. They also tend to be group-centered societies in which social co-operation and self-sacrifice for the greater good are expected and hierarchy and social status are important. Many countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America are considered high context, group-centered societies.

In low context societies, such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Western Europe, business relationships tend to be more short-term, information is exchanged explicitly and people follow rules and standards closely. They also tend to be more individualistic and egalitarian, valuing independence, self-sufficiency, equality, and personal fulfilment. Employees are more likely to defend their interests and strive to achieve their personal goals.

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Although all of us are behaving in ways that are not only acceptable in our culture, but encouraged, it's easy to see why conflicts can occur.

### Resolving conflict across cultures

Today's global managers need the ability to understand, influence, and motivate across cultures. Cultural dexterity is especially needed when preventing and resolving conflicts. For example:

- Employees from many group-centered cultures will not bring concerns forward, fearing damaging relationships through a loss of face -- losing the respect of others; being humiliated or feeling disgraced publically. As a result, individualist managers working in a group-centered society need to rely less of what is said and more on non-verbal cues and that culture's expected behaviours and expectations. Conflicts may only be expressed through missed deadlines and the general efficiency and productivity of the group.
- In high context countries such as Japan, individualistic managers need to use face-saving language when providing feedback. This would include a calm, respectful tone of voice, and being comfortable with silences.
- While employees in low context countries like Germany expect their managers to be direct and verbalize their feelings, those in high context societies prefer managers to deal with relationship aspects and restore harmony before addressing issues. When issues are being discussed, begin by providing examples of how well the team has performed and how the employee has contributed to overall success. Then ask the employee for ideas on ways he or she could further contribute to the team and the organization. Offer your own suggestions and come to a consensus on how to proceed.
- Employees from an individualistic culture expect their managers to resolve conflicts by allowing all parties to speak equally then helping *facilitate* a collaborative resolution. In a more group-centered workplace, a manager may hear from everyone but may be expected to make the final decision.

Finally, it's important for global managers to understand that although there are similarities between certain cultures, each is unique and has its own values and priorities that guide social behaviour.

### When to step away

If a conflict escalates to include threats, insults, racial slurs, sexual harassment or physical contact, approach your Human Resources department, direct report, union representative or occupational health and safety rep. In the West especially, there is often strict legislation to protect employees from harassment and discrimination. In addition, most international companies have strict policies against such behaviours.

### Let us help

If you need more information on the role of culture in the workplace or managing conflicts, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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