



Let's talk about conflict resolution

Personal conflicts are normal but they're not necessarily bad. Healthy conflicts can actually improve communication, foster collaboration, resolve problems and bring people together. However, unhealthy conflicts do the opposite. They can damage relationships, exacerbate problems and divide work teams and families. The difference between the two? How they're handled and resolved.

Healthy vs. unhealthy conflict

Unhealthy conflict is characterized by:

- Angry, accusatory, hurtful remarks
- No expectation of a resolution or good outcome
- Avoiding issues or "shutting down"
- Rejection, shaming, or threats of retaliation
- Fear of abandonment or isolation
- Not recognizing or responding to the concerns of other people

A healthy conflict is when there is:

- Focus on the issues
- Avoidance of emotional language or behaviour
- Belief there will be a positive resolution that meets the needs of both parties
- No fear of retaliation, abandonment or isolation
- Recognizing and paying attention to the feelings and views being expressed by others
- A willingness to compromise and forgive

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Reasons for conflict

But why do conflicts happen in the first place? Some of the main reasons are:

- **Poor communication.** Different communication styles can lead to misunderstandings. For example, an offhand remark by one person may be interpreted as a personal insult by another.
- **Different values.** Each of us sees the world through different cultural, generational, or philosophical lenses. Conflict can happen when there is a lack of understanding or acceptance about how others perceive a situation.
- **Differing interests.** Conflict occurs when individuals 'fight' to attain their personal goals, putting them before organizational or family needs and disregarding the feelings of others.
- **Personality clashes.** We're not all going to like each other, but we all do need to find ways to work and live effectively together.
- **Different work styles.** Everyone has a different way of getting things done and conflicting working styles can cause problems at home and on the job.
- **Perceived inequities.** People can feel resentful or angry if they feel they shoulder a greater work load or more responsibilities.

Resolving conflicts

Conflicts don't resolve themselves. In fact, left unaddressed, they usually get worse. Fortunately, there are strategies we can learn that can help resolve most professional or personal conflict. However, it's important to note that cultural differences play a big role. For example, the direct, face-to-face conflict resolution approach favoured in most Western cultures is seen as embarrassing, demeaning or even shameful – a loss of face – in others. It's important to understand and respect how people from other countries approach and prefer to resolve conflict. Therefore, when addressing issues with colleagues from, or in many Asian countries, such as Japan, Westerners need to use face-saving language and understand that non-verbal communication – body language and silence – are as important as words.

However, as a general guide, the following conflict resolution techniques can be helpful in most situations:

- **Stay calm and be respectful.** When we are angry we make other people defensive. If anger is being directed at you, staying calm and speaking quietly is the best way to diffuse the situation.
- **Know when to step away.** If emotions are running high, agree to discuss the issue later. If insults or threats are involved, walk away. If at work, contact your HR department, a trusted Manager or union representative. Most companies have codes of conduct and most countries have legislation protecting employees from harassment and discrimination.

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- **Pay attention to body language.** Be aware of the non-verbal messages you are sending through your facial expression, gestures, and posture. Also, pay attention to the body language of others – it may help you determine how they are feeling or what they are trying to say.
- **Don't involve others in a conflict.** If you are having issues with a family member, friend or work colleague, don't complain to others or draw them into taking sides. Concentrate on resolving the issues.
- **Listen.** Give the other person a chance to tell his or her side of the story without interrupting. Most people won't be willing to change or see your side of the story until they feel that you've taken the time to hear and understand what they have to say.
- **Be prepared to compromise.** Resolving conflicts fairly almost always involves give and take on both sides.

Conflict is inevitable because everyone is different and nobody is perfect. But working towards effective resolutions in a calm and respectful way is an indication of maturity, integrity and character. In the workplace, it is an essential cultural and leadership skill. To learn more about conflict resolution, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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