How to resolve conflict in the workplace

Conflict is an inevitable part of professional life. It's unrealistic to expect everyone to get along 100% of the time, especially in a diverse or high-pressure workplace. But as natural as conflict may be, it's never nice or easy to deal with.

If left unaddressed, workplace conflict can lead to low morale and a drop in productivity. It can even affect your mental well-being. However, when managed effectively, conflict can be an opportunity to strengthen relationships and innovate new solutions to problems.

Whether you're a manager, supervisor, HR professional or employee, understanding how to manage and resolve conflicts is essential for a happy work life. In this guide, discover techniques to deal with tense situations in the workplace.

What is conflict resolution?

Conflict resolution is finding a peaceful solution to disagreements that the opposing parties can agree on. In simple terms it means settling a disagreement so that both people, or sides, can move forward. It's essential for maintaining a positive workplace culture, fostering teamwork and staying productive.

Common reasons for conflict in the workplace

- **Miscommunication:** unclear instructions, lack of information, misunderstandings, or communication barriers. Miscommunication can lead to confusion, frustration and errors, often escalating into larger conflicts if not addressed promptly.
- **Creative differences:** in any workplace, differences in ideas and approaches are inevitable. Resolving these differences requires compromise and teamwork.
- **Conflicting goals:** competing goals can cause friction with other people or teams. This could involve competing for resources or recognition.

- **Poor work habits:** differences in work habits and ethics can also lead to conflicts in the workplace. This includes issues like commitment, punctuality, work quality and meeting deadlines.

Why is conflict resolution important?

Conflicts come and go within the workplace, whether it's a clash over ideas or two strong personalities butting heads. The key is how well you resolve them. Settling conflicts contributes to a more positive and collaborative work culture. Here's why it's so beneficial.

Maintains high morale

Unresolved conflicts can lead to stress and can create a toxic work environment, which can affect job performance and the well-being of everyone in the workplace. By resolving conflicts, employees feel heard and valued, leading to more positive outcomes.

Strengthens workplace relationships

Conflicts are opportunities for team members to understand differing perspectives and work styles better. This builds respect among colleagues, which is essential for smooth teamwork and collaboration.

Increases ability to achieve goals

The quick resolution of conflicts means employees can focus on tasks, rather than interpersonal issues. This helps with meeting targets, innovating and driving the organisation forward.

Conflict resolution skills

Developing conflict-resolution skills is essential for anyone in the workplace. They help you deal with issues more confidently, leading to better outcomes for all involved. Let's explore some key skills that are important for successful conflict resolution.

- **Active listening:** this is a worthwhile skill to have at work and at home. The act of focused listening helps show respect and empathy, which can help settle conflicts faster. Active listening can also reveal issues that may not have been recognised earlier, paving the way for an effective solution.

- **Teamwork:** teamwork involves joining efforts together towards a common goal, even when disagreements arise. Committing to teamwork allows you to focus on the bigger picture, and work together to find solutions that benefit the entire group.
- **Communication:** expressing thoughts and feelings clearly helps in resolving misunderstandings and disagreements. Good communication involves being able to convey empathy and understanding, leading to more productive discussions.
- **Problem solving:** effective problem solving requires a combination of analytical and creative thinking, to understand the problem and find innovative solutions. This skill is useful with complicated issues, where traditional solutions might not work.

How to resolve workplace conflict

Conflict is uncomfortable, no matter the circumstances. Resolving a conflict with a coworker is challenging – which is why it's important to take a measured, open-minded approach. Whether you're a manager, HR professional or employee, here's a step-by-step guide to help you out.

1. **Have a conversation with the other person:** the first step is to have a direct conversation with the other person involved, if you feel safe enough to do so. Choose a private setting with a neutral party present so you can both express your views openly and honestly.
2. **Practise active listening:** active listening involves fully concentrating on, understanding, responding to and remembering what is being said. Make an effort to listen to the other person's perspective without interrupting or planning your response.
3. **Identify points of agreement or disagreement:** after you have both shared your views, work together to find areas of agreement and disagreement. Recognising common ground can pave the path to resolution.
4. **Develop a plan to work on the conflict:** once the key issues have been identified, develop a plan to address the conflict. It's important to ensure that the plan is fair and considers the needs and concerns of everyone involved. Setting clear expectations and timelines can also help in keeping the resolution process on track.
5. **Follow through with the plan:** the final step is to follow through with the agreed-upon actions. Regular check-ins can be helpful to assess your progress and make adjustments to the plan if necessary.

Tips for conflict resolution at the workplace

Conflict causes stress and anxiety, and makes the workplace an unpleasant

environment, not just for those directly involved, but for everyone. Of course, resolving conflict involves effort that goes beyond taking the few steps mentioned above. Here are some extra tips below.

Monitor your body language

A lot can be conveyed without saying a word. Your body language speaks volumes, so make sure it reflects openness and a willingness to resolve the issue. This includes maintaining eye contact (without aggression), facing the person you are speaking with and avoiding defensive gestures like crossed arms and frowning.

Practise active listening

Active listening involves attentively listening, understanding, responding to and remembering what the other person has said. This requires a genuine effort to understand the other person's perspective. By practising active listening, you validate the other person's feelings and concerns.

Consider asking someone to mediate

In some cases, it might be good to involve a neutral third party to mediate the discussion. This could be an HR representative or a team leader. They can help moderate the conversation, making sure that both parties are heard and assisting in finding a mutually acceptable solution.

Conflict in the workplace is inevitable, but how it's handled can make all the difference. The ability to handle interpersonal conflicts is an essential skill that leads to a more positive work environment for everyone. By understanding the causes of conflicts and using strategies to overcome them, you can help create a peaceful, productive and respectful workplace.

FAQs

What are common types of workplace conflicts?

Common types of workplace conflicts include:
- personality clashes,
- communication issues,

- differences in values or beliefs,
- competition for resources, and
- conflicts of interest.

Personality clashes often arise from differing work styles or personalities, while communication issues can come from misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Differences in values or beliefs can lead to disagreements over work methods or goals. Competition for resources such as time, budget or team members, can create tension. Conflicts of interest may occur when personal goals conflict with professional responsibilities.

When should I involve management or HR?

Management or HR should be involved in a workplace conflict when the issue can't be resolved by the employees, if it escalates to harassment or discrimination, or if it significantly impacts the work environment. Management or HR can provide a neutral perspective and come up with effective resolutions.

What if a conflict persists despite attempts to resolve it?

If a conflict doesn't quite disappear completely, it may be necessary to reevaluate the strategies and seek external help. This could involve mediation by a neutral third party, more involvement from HR or management, or even professional conflict-resolution services. Persistent conflicts might indicate underlying issues that require a different approach.

What are the long-term benefits of resolving workplace conflicts?

The long-term benefits of resolving workplace conflicts include:

- improved team dynamics,
- increased productivity,
- enhanced employee satisfaction and morale, and
- a reduction in turnover rates.

Effective conflict resolution leads to a more positive work environment, where employees feel valued and heard.