

# COPING WITH CONFLICT: 10 CONSIDERATIONS

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**Conflict in the workplace is inevitable.** Conflict anywhere in life is inevitable. Accept this reality. If you resist it, you make yourself miserable, and you probably won't do what it takes to resolve issues effectively when they arise. If you deal with conflict head-on time and time again, you start to feel more comfortable doing it. It's like anything else: do it more regularly, and you diminish your hesitation and fear. Moving through life avoiding conflict and its residue reduces your personal and professional power. Are you satisfied with that?

**The following ten considerations can strengthen your ability to deal with conflict, help you reach a viable resolution, and actually bring you out on the other side to a much better place. Try these today:**

## 1. Acknowledge that a conflict exists between you and another person.

Face the fact that Tom doesn't like your idea for the team project and that he intends to shoot it down every chance he gets. Denying this doesn't make his resistance disappear or change his behavior during team meetings. Pretending that Tom isn't annoyed with you hardly alters the fact that he is annoyed with you. Acknowledge inside your head that you and Tom are definitely in conflict. You can choose to be silently frustrated and let him bulldoze over you, or you can confront him about your differences in a respectful way.

## 2. Decide if the conflict is worth confronting in the first place.

What is at stake? Is using your idea essential to the organization's viability? Is making sure your idea is heard and valued by the group critical to your future within the company? As objectively as possible, rank the seriousness of the conflict and the need for resolution. Some conflicts just aren't worth the time, energy, and effort it takes to rock or massage the boat. Maybe they are too small, too insignificant, too petty. YOU have to determine which conflicts are worth all that goes into any conflict.

## 3. Consider the professional position of the person with whom you are in conflict.

The other person's position may very well determine how you handle the conflict. Is the issue with your boss, a Board member, a peer, or an employee? How well do you know that individual? To what extent do you respect his/her judgment in general? What is his/her opinion of you? Assess whether or not it is wise to deal with a conflict that involves your supervisor. What are the



consequences of dealing with it, and what are the consequences of letting it go? Remember: working through conflict or choosing to ignore it always has some sort of price tag. It's a matter of whether or not you want to pay the price. Evaluate the situation prudently.

## 4. Acknowledge the positives that have existed in your relationship with the other person prior to the conflict.

Because most relationships have one or more positives in them, use those positives as a foundation for dialogue. When you talk with Tom, tell him directly that you've always appreciated his creativity and humor, and you know he'll pull these out of his arsenal as the two of you work through the issue together. Such an opening statement sets the tone for productive conversation and helps preserve your relationship with him. Keep in mind that preservation of relationships is crucial in the workplace unless you're prepared to leave. Even then, if you don't want anybody bad-mouthing you or refusing to give you a decent reference, you need to consider the quality of relationships.

## 5. Discuss the conflict privately at a mutually convenient time.

While there are occasions when a conflict must be dealt with in front of a group, frequently you have the opportunity to do it behind closed doors during a time both people agree upon. Privacy allows both parties to focus on the other person exclusively and avoid the influence of others' facial expressions and comments. Setting a specific time to discuss the issue also demonstrates that you value the subject matter as well as the other person's views about it, and that you look forward to reaching a healthy resolution that everybody can live with. Going head to head in a meeting and

then acting as if nothing happened is phony. The private environment allows you to engage in a more authentic process.

## 6. Stick to the issue.

This is one of the most difficult things for people to do. There is a human tendency to bring up history, other types of current, ongoing conflicts, and things that bug you about the other individual. Try to avoid that. It is counterproductive for the folks involved and for the organization as a whole. If Tom opposes your idea for the team project, then he needs to explain why he disagrees with you—period. He shouldn't be bringing up your impractical idea from three years ago, his frustration over your tight relationship with another team member or your irritating stoic personality. None of these is relevant to this discussion.

## 7. Steer clear of demeaning, profane, and/or abusive language.

The advice here is simply this: don't engage in it. For the sake of your professional reputation and the sake of the other person's wellbeing, don't do it. In general, people don't respect it or you. Avoid all name calling, street profanity, and derogatory statements. While you may feel better as you're saying it, the other person probably feels terrible. This type of language drags the conversation down to a base level. It's very difficult to resolve a conflict when one or both parties are completely out of line. Take the high road, and choose your words carefully. A conversation always ends, but the tone and effects of it linger long after you walk out of Tom's office.

## 8. Give the other person a chance to talk.

If you are truly seeking resolution, then you need to let the other person explain to you why he/she feels a certain way about a given situation. If you are the one to initiate dialogue, you may want to invite Tom to speak first. Refrain from taking center stage and monopolizing the entire conversation. Barging into Tom's office, plopping down on a chair, and barraging him with your nonstop emotional soliloquy doesn't quite communicate

to him that you want to work towards a reasonable resolution to the conflict between the two of you. Be sure to let him talk without interrupting him. When both people feel heard, they are more likely to be real with each other and more open to finding common ground.

## 9. Look for a fresh solution together.

Sometimes the answer to conflict is not one party giving in and the other party winning. Sometimes the best way to resolve an issue is for both people to get creative and devise a brand new solution that neither of them considered previously. Maybe Tom's original idea was good and your original idea was good, but the idea both of you create together could turn out to be the best one. Be open to this possibility. Too often conflict becomes a power struggle. When that happens, everyone loses. Conflict actually provides an opportunity to dream and accomplish great things. Think about it. Run with it.

## 10. Preserve the other person's place in the organization as well as your own.

You can value another individual's contributions to a company and yet be in conflict with him/her at the same time. It doesn't have to boil down to "either them or me". Conflict really boils down to this: what BOTH people can bring to the table that can make a positive difference. Assuming both people are intelligent, skilled, and invested in a good outcome, both people have something to give to the situation. Conflict is not about proving that the other individual doesn't belong there just because his/her idea is different from yours.

In conclusion, how you cope with conflict reveals a lot about you as a person: your concern or lack of concern for others, your stage of growth, your level of maturity. An employer also observes your handling of conflict from the standpoint of how well you fit into the team and the organization at large. What message are you sending to your boss?

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