

Conflict resolution: Not all conflict is bad: How to jump into the good kind and create a win-win

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Abstract

Just mentioning conflict is enough to make some people cringe. However, when thinking of conflict resolution, it is important to remember a few key concepts. First, not all conflict is bad. Second, most conflict does not go away on its own, so it is better to address it sooner than later.

I have always heard that veterinarians avoid conflict. While not every veterinarian is the same, I will say that I have found that the majority of veterinarians I have known certainly do prefer to avoid conflict. On the flip side, a small percentage choose to confront conflict head-on and aggressively, which only serves to push the conflict underground.

What we know is that employees want someone to step up and resolve the conflict so everyone can move on. The reality is you don't have to always get it right, but you do have to try. Ignoring the conflict and hoping it will resolve itself only makes valuable team members disengage and eventually leave.

In this session we will introduce you to some styles of conflict resolution, but more importantly, to some conflict resolution skills that are universally applicable to all types of conflict at work and at home.

Key words Conflict resolution, trust, communication, listening, humor, leadership

Understanding Conflict

Conflict is a normal part of any healthy relationship. After all, two people can't be expected to agree on everything, all the time. The more people you add to the equation, the greater the likelihood of conflict. The key is not to avoid conflict but to learn how to resolve it in a healthy and timely manner.

When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to a relationship, but when handled in a respectful, positive way, conflict provides an opportunity to strengthen the bond between two people. Have you ever seen two technicians or veterinarians that initially disliked each other, but after some early conflicts were resolved, ultimately became the best of friends? Thankfully, it happens all the time.

Conflict arises from differences, both large and small. It occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires. Sometimes these differences appear trivial, but when a conflict triggers strong feelings, a deep personal need is often at the core of the

problem. These needs can range from the need to feel safe and secure or respected and valued.

Take yourself outside of the workplace for a moment. Think about the opposing needs of a toddler and a parent. The child's need is to explore, so venturing into the street or the cliff edge meets that need. But the parent's need is to protect the child's safety, a need that can only be met by limiting the toddler's exploration. Since these needs are at odds, conflict arises.

The needs of each party play an important role in the long-term success of a relationship. Each deserves respect and consideration. In the workplace, differing needs can result in incomplete tasks, lack of training, lost productivity, turnover, theft of cash or supplies and in extreme cases – physical violence.

When you can recognize conflicting needs and are willing to examine them with compassion and understanding, it can lead to creative problem solving, team building, stronger relationships and increased employee engagement.

Here are some rules about conflict that are universally applicable:

- **A conflict is more than just a disagreement.** It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real or perceived).
- **Conflicts continue to fester when ignored.** Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being and survival, they stay with us until we face and resolve them. Just like subclinical mastitis, it is the conflict below the surface that we do not see that robs us of our productivity.
- **We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions** of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our past life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs.
- **Conflicts trigger strong emotions.** If you aren't comfortable with your emotions or able to manage them in times of stress, you won't be able to resolve conflict successfully. Research has shown that our subconscious mind processes 200 times faster than our conscious mind. Unfortunately, emotions emanate from our subconscious mind. Therefore, if you have ever tried to resolve a conflict and the person cannot get ahead of their emotional response, you now know why. Under those circumstances it is best

to let their conscious mind catch up and address that conflict later.

- **Conflicts are an opportunity for growth.** When you're able to resolve conflict in a relationship, it builds trust. You can feel secure knowing your relationship can survive challenges and disagreements. Employee satisfaction, productivity and engagement are all built on the foundation of employee trust. If you build trust you will build a strong practice team.

What is your Personal Response to Conflict?

Do you fear conflict or avoid it at all costs? If your perception of conflict comes from painful memories from early childhood or previous unhealthy relationships, you may expect all disagreements to end badly. You may view conflict as demoralizing, humiliating, or something to fear. If your early life experiences left you feeling powerless or out of control, conflict may even be traumatizing for you.

If you're afraid of conflict, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When you enter a conflict situation already feeling threatened, it's tough to deal with the problem at hand in a healthy way. Instead, you're more likely to either shut down or blow up in anger.

Tips for Managing and Resolving Conflict

You can ensure that the process of managing and resolving conflict is as positive as possible by sticking to the following guidelines:

- **Listen for what is felt as well as said.** When you really listen, you connect more deeply to your own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening also strengthens, informs, and makes it easier for others to hear you when it's your turn to speak.
- **Make conflict resolution the priority rather than winning or "being right."** Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than "winning" the argument, should always be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and their viewpoint.
- **Focus on the present.** If you're holding on to grudges based on past conflicts, your ability to see the reality of the current situation will be impaired. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the here-and-now to solve the problem.
- **Pick your battles.** Conflicts can be draining, so it's important to consider whether the issue is really worth your time and energy. Maybe you don't want to surrender a parking space if you've been circling for 15 minutes, but if there are dozens of empty spots, arguing over a single space isn't worth it.

- **Be willing to forgive.** Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive others. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can serve only to deplete and drain your life.
- **Know when to let something go.** If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.
- **Humor is an excellent tool for resolving conflict.** By using humor, you can avoid many confrontations and resolve arguments and disagreements by communicating in a humorous way. Humor can help you say things that might otherwise be difficult to express without offending someone. However, it's important that you laugh with the other person, not at them. When humor and play are used to reduce tension and anger, reframe problems, and put the situation into perspective, the conflict can actually become an opportunity for greater connection and intimacy.

Conflict Management Skills

Conflict resolution can be approached using a variety of different conflict management styles. While these styles may differ, every method utilizes the same conflict management skills. To successfully manage conflict, you'll need to practice and learn when to apply each one. Below are some of the core skills and characteristics that you'll need to adopt if you want to effectively manage workplace conflicts.

- **Active listening** begins with intently focusing on what each person involved in the conflict has to say. Making note of their phrasing then responding using their same wording. This not only demonstrates that you were listening, but it will also help clear up any confusion about your argument. Additionally, be sure to ask questions when you're confused about a point and focus on identifying the other person's goals. The challenge to active listening is that it forces you to turn off the voices in your head that are formulating responses or anticipating what the people are going to say next. In active listening, you should only be listening.
- **Emotional intelligence** describes the ability to read and understand your emotions, as well as the emotions of others. This is incredibly important for conflict management because it prevents escalation. If you can effectively interpret your opposition's emotions, it's easier to communicate with them without provoking them. If you can eliminate frustration and anger from the conflict, people will be more likely to focus on compromising because they aren't distracted by their emotions. However, it is important to remember what we mentioned earlier,

sometimes you can't get ahead of emotions, so you have to address the conflict another time.

- **Be patient**, conflicts are rarely simple or easy to overcome, especially if you have allowed them to grow unchecked. People don't like to be wrong and will often hold their stance on an issue until they're right or proven wrong. If you're looking to resolve a conflict, it's important to keep in mind that the problem may not be resolved quickly, even if the solution is obvious. In these cases, it is important to set a specific time to circle back and address the issues again. If you honor your commitment, all parties will know that you are taking the conflict seriously and are committed to resolving it.

Remember that regardless of what the conflict is, you need to take the time to listen to every participant and value each argument evenly. Even if there's an obvious answer, rushing to a resolution prior to hearing everyone can make people feel like they're left out in the decision-making process. Taking the time to equally consider all options now can help create a long-term solution that will save you a headache down the road.

Conflicts can be difficult to resolve because they often never stay focused solely on the conflict itself. The conflict usually acts as an initial spark that ignites previous tension that has built up between the two parties over time. Now the problem that started the conflict can't be resolved because of the historical bias that exists between the participants. In these cases, it's important to separate the conflict from the people who are involved with it. Don't focus on the people and their personal characteristics, instead, look at the problem itself and center your energy on finding a middle ground. While you probably can't solve your personal issues with the other person, you can definitely work on the tangible issues that impede you from meeting goals.

- **Being positive** with your conflict management is a great way to keep progress moving forward. Conflicts are full of roadblocks and you'll need to be willing to overcome them if you want to come to a resolution. Having the right attitude towards facing the conflict can become a catalyst for other participants who may be more exhausted from the interactions. If you cannot be positive, it sometimes sends the perception that you are not fully vested in the process and the outcome, therefore, it is hard for others to become fully vested. You must always control your emotions before you step in to handle conflict between others. If you are having a bad day, you are better off waiting instead of making an initial half-hearted attempt at resolution.

Conflicts create a relationship between the participants that doesn't end with the resolution of the

problem. This relationship lasts forever and needs to be nurtured for the conflict to remain solved.

Creating an open line of communication between the two parties is the best approach for fostering a healthy, long-term relationship. Both parties can check in on one another and make sure that both ends of the agreement are being upheld. If new challenges arise, this communication channel makes it easier for participants to address the roadblock without risking any progress they've previously made.

While these skills can help you and your team manage conflicts and prevent them from escalating, it's important to understand how you can use them in action to work towards resolutions.

Conflict Resolution Skills

We just outlined some general conflict management skills for managing conflict in the workplace, now we are going to present some more specific skills that can be utilized to help bring conflict to resolution. Conflict resolution is the process in which two or more parties work towards a solution to a problem or dispute when the issue negatively affects one party or multiple and has escalated to the point where it needs to be addressed. Participants are then required to work together to produce a common agreement that resolves the issue.

1. Don't become defensive out of the gate.

In any conflict, it's easy to jump to the defense. Rather than getting defensive about an attack on your argument, take it as an opportunity to see things from a different point-of-view. You don't have to agree with that person, but you can try to understand where they're coming from. You each have your own opinion and refusing to hear their point of view creates an impossible scenario to navigate. Instead, change those "yes, but" statements into "I understand, and" statements that build off one another, rather than tearing each other down.

2. Don't point fingers.

On the opposite side, jumping on the offensive is also disrespectful and creates a negative foundation that often leads to rapid escalation, which makes finding a resolution more difficult.

Don't put blame on others or create a space in which someone feels unsafe to voice their opinion. The best way to solve a conflict is by allowing each person to frame their argument without being blamed or shut down. After all, you wouldn't appreciate the same being done to you, either.

3. Actively listen, until they are completely finished.

I think this is the fourth time I have referenced the importance of listening, which should drive home just how important listening is to the conflict resolu-

tion process. Listening is a huge aspect of conflict resolution. Avoid the temptation to explain every little detail of your argument. Instead, let the other person express their concerns, uninterrupted. You may find that you misinterpreted their original argument and you'll be better able to handle compromising or collaborating on a new solution when you've taken the time to listen and truly understand where they are coming from.

4. Use "I" statements.
Beginning with a series of statements that begin with "you" can easily be interpreted as blaming, or even attacking. Thus, using "I" statements, such as "I feel like I'm not getting the chance to explain myself" rather than "You're not listening to me" can totally transform the conversation. These sentences will make your argument more about your emotions, opinions, personal beliefs, and morals, rather than about all the things you don't like about the opposing party. No one can disagree with something you believe or standby, and it makes for a more respectful dialogue.
5. Maintain a calm tone.
In customer service training, the first thing they teach you is to remain calm and speak softly at a moderate pace. No matter how loudly a client is screaming, they will quickly "mirror" your volume and cadence so you can begin to resolve their concern. When you enter the conflict resolution meeting, you should be calm and ready to debate with consideration for differing perspectives.
6. Show a willingness to compromise or collaborate.
For smaller, trivial conflicts, avoiding them may make sense. In other words, simply let it go. An accommodating style may work when the other party seems to care much more about the solution than you do. And, a competing style could be the choice when there is limited time to make a decision and you simply need to put your foot down.
However, in most other significant conflicts, it's essential to come to some sort of agreement between both parties. Thus, you sometimes need to let go of your pride and show the opposing party that, as much as you care about the conflict, you care more about coming to a solution that pleases everyone and has the necessary impact. This is especially true for practice leaders. Giving a little bit of ground every now and then actually helps the staff feel more vested in the success of the practice.
7. Maintain confidence at all times.
What happens between you and the various parties involved should stay between you and them, unless it's absolutely necessary to divulge the details of your conflict. This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges faces newly minted managers as they

gain experience. Eventually, a good manager will learn that if they need to share or vent, they must do so up the Organizational Chart and never down. The long-term trust damage can be tremendous to a new manager and undermine the confidence of the entire team. I think it was Warren Buffet that said, "trust is earned by the drop and lost by the bucket." In some cases, the damage from violating team trust can be worse than the original team conflict you were trying to resolve.

8. Nothing is personal.
A conflict with a customer or team member is typically not a conflict with you, personally. It usually involves your professional role or something that occurred to or with you. Thus, a conflict that emerges is never an attack on you. Another mentor of mine used to say, "people say offensive things all the time, you choose to be offended."
9. Body language says more than what they are saying to you.
Body language can tell you when someone is saying one thing but means another. By being emotionally aware, you can notice when someone's posture, gestures, or facial expressions differ from their words. When someone says, "I'm fine," you can tell they're not fine if they avert their eyes. Never cross your arms while speaking with an upset coworker or client and never multi-task or reach for a door-knob while telling them what they have to say is important.
10. It is true, sometimes you can be right, or you can be happy.
A conflict in the workplace is typically one that involves more than just yourself. Perhaps it's a frustrating call with an angry client or an issue with a coworker. Thus, when you're trying to resolve the conflict, you might need to take a step back and reassess the situation. Recognize that, even if you have a strong opinion on one end of the spectrum, it might be beneficial to wave the white flag if it ultimately improves the conditions for everyone else. Conflict resolution is occasionally about making those sacrifices. I find this to be the case when I am mentoring, but the mentee will not take my advice. Sometimes, they have to learn by trying their idea and failing and you have to give them the room to be able to do that so they can grow. Tom Peters used to say the "experienced managers make the best decisions, managers get experience by making bad decisions."
11. Know when to admit you were wrong.
Sometimes, you will be the one on the wrong end of conflict. I once had a mentor that told me if I am having a day when all of the clients are crazy, or all of the staff is acting crazy, it is probably me. Two of the hardest words to say are, "I'm sorry." It's not easy

to apologize when you feel like you have been right all along. Don't let your stubborn attitude and pride deter you from making amends with the opposing party.

12. Focus on today's conflict.

In attempting to resolve a conflict, you may start getting frustrated with the other person. This can bring up memories of past conflicts you've had with that person. And, in the heat of the moment, it can feel like the perfect time to bring those up, too.

I like to consider a 48-hour rule. If a conflict emerges or there's something that bothers you about someone else, you limit the discussion to the events of the last 48 hours. Once that time frame has passed, you should let it go. So, any pent-up frustrations about past conflicts that were never resolved should not be brought up later on when trying to resolve a different conflict. It is important to remain in the present.

13. Use humor, when appropriate.

Yes, this is a repeat, which shows you how important it is. Using humor to lighten the mood during conflict resolution is a powerful tool, but you must never want to offend someone by making a joke about something that is a sensitive or personal topic.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, a conflict is usually one small roadblock in an, otherwise, healthy relationship. While the parties involved may never become friends outside of work, they need to be able to function in the workplace. In most cases, they won't even remember the conflict after some time has passed. So, always act with the long-term big picture in mind.