



## Issue #4: Managing Workplace Conflict



Every workplace has a variety of personalities that can sometimes clash. Managing workplace conflict effectively requires a cool head and keeping an eye on the real goals — saving time, energy, and reducing stress.

**We've all met them at some point in our working lives:** the gossip, the complainer, the know-it-all, the bully, the kiss-up, the procrastinator, the control freak, the game player — the list goes on. They're the people who waste our time, cause us stress, and often draw us into unwanted conflict and drama.

An array of talents and personalities are needed if a business intends to remain innovative and competitive. Conflicts can be costly for employees and employers. 52% of work time is wasted defending, avoiding, and venting to others.<sup>1</sup> Absenteeism (due to workplace conflict) costs Canadian firms more than three billion dollars a year.<sup>2</sup>

Employees who feel mistreated and disrespected often withhold ideas and refuse to share information, skills, and knowledge, which further damages organizations.<sup>3</sup> Workplace conflicts also result in increased client complaints, sabotage, increased injury and accidents, rising disability claims, grievances and litigation, employee turnover; and low morale.

For individuals, the results are equally damaging. They include: stress, frustration and anxiety; depression; loss of sleep; strained relationships; and poor performance. There are many causes for conflict.

### Sources of conflict include:

- **Poor communication.** Different communication styles can lead to misunderstandings.
- **Different values.** Each of us sees the world differently. Conflict occurs when there is a lack of acceptance about these differences.
- **Differing interests.** Conflict happens when individuals 'fight' to attain their personal goals, putting them before organizational goals 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 effectively together.



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- **Different work styles.** We all work in different ways and conflicting working styles can cause problems.
- **Poor performance.** When one or more people within a department are performing poorly and others are picking up the slack, conflict is inevitable.

### Addressing Conflict

People deal with conflict in different ways. Some ignore it and hope it goes away; others compete and let the winner take all; some accommodate by surrendering their own needs to please the other person; and others collaborate to find a mutually beneficial solution or compromise and find the middle ground.

Collaboration and/or compromise are the most productive ways of dealing with any dispute. No one loses and everyone wins.

### Resolution

The first step in resolving a workplace conflict is to think about the other person's point of view. Try to be reasonable, respectful and polite, or at least neutral, in all your dealings. Your rational behaviour might encourage the other person to act accordingly. If simply changing your own behaviour isn't enough, you might need to address the person head on. If so, keep the following in mind:

### Tips for resolving conflict

- **Try to understand the cause of the conflict.** What's the problem really about? Is it a personality conflict? Is a personal agenda getting in the way of organizational needs?
- **Be prepared with some solutions.** Before you even approach the other person, be prepared to offer some possible solutions for your face-to-face chat.

- **Stay calm and stick to the subject.** Avoid saying things like, "You make life difficult for everyone!" or "You never get your work to me in time!" Accusatory statements only make people defensive.
- **Listen to the other person.** Give the other person a chance to tell his or her side of the issue without interrupting.
- **Be prepared to compromise.** Resolving conflicts fairly almost always involves give and take on both sides.
- **Get help from a manager or human resources representative, if necessary.** If you don't feel that you can handle the conflict on your own, talk to your manager, or someone from human resources, for support.

### The Last Word

You might think work would be so much easier if you didn't have to deal with difficult people, but difficult co-workers or clients can actually be helpful in your professional growth. Successfully managing workplace conflict requires patience, logic, excellent communication skills, and a cool head — essential tools for any successful people-leader, or anyone else trying to resolve conflict in order to maintain a healthy workplace.

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1. *Safety Council of Canada, 2002*
  2. *CPRN, 2001*
  3. *Sloan Management Review 2001*

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