

Conflict in the Work Environment

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to address conflict that can arise in professional settings. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Is Conflict?

The word **conflict** produces a sense of anxiety for many people, but it is part of the human experience. Just because conflict is universal does not mean that we cannot improve how we handle disagreements, misunderstandings, and struggles to understand or make ourselves understood.

Conflict is the physical or psychological struggle associated with the perception of opposing or incompatible goals, desires, demands, wants, or needs. When incompatible goals, scarce resources, or interference are present, conflict is a typical result, but it doesn't mean the relationship is poor or failing.

All relationships progress through times of conflict and collaboration. How we navigate and negotiate these challenges influences, reinforces, or destroys the relationship.



BIG IDEA

Conflict is universal, but how and when it occurs is open to influence and interpretation. Rather than viewing conflict from a negative frame of reference, view it as an opportunity for clarification, growth, and even reinforcement of the relationship.



TERM TO KNOW

Conflict

The physical or psychological struggle associated with the perception of opposing or incompatible goals, desires, demands, wants, or needs.

2. Conflict Management Strategies

As professional communicators, we can acknowledge and anticipate that conflict will be present in every context or environment where communication occurs.

To that end, we can predict, anticipate, and formulate strategies to address conflict successfully. How you

choose to approach conflict influences its resolution.

2a. Avoidance

You may choose to change the subject, leave the room, or not even enter the room in the first place, but the conflict will remain and resurface when you least expect it. Your reluctance to address the conflict directly is a normal response, and one which many cultures prize.

In cultures where independence is highly valued, direct confrontation is more common. In cultures where the community is emphasized over the individual, indirect strategies may be more common. Avoidance allows for more time to resolve the problem, but can also increase costs associated with the problem in the first place.

Your organization or business will have policies and protocols to follow regarding conflict and redress, but it is always wise to consider the position of your conversational partner or opponent and to give them, as well as yourself, time to explore alternatives.

2b. Defensiveness vs. Supportiveness

Defensive communication is characterized by control, evaluation, and judgments, while supportive communication focuses on the points and not the personalities.

When we feel judged or criticized, our ability to listen can be diminished, and we may only hear the negative message. By choosing to focus on the message instead of on the messenger, we can keep the discussion supportive and professional.

2c. Face-Detracting vs. Face-Saving

Communication is not competition. Communication is the sharing of understanding and meaning, but does everyone always share equally? People struggle for control, limit access to resources and information as part of territorial displays, and otherwise use the process of communication to engage in competition.

People also use communication for collaboration. Both competition and collaboration can be observed in communication interactions, but there are two concepts central to both: face-detracting and face-saving strategies.

Face-detracting strategies involve messages or statements that take away from the respect, integrity, or credibility of a person. Face-saving strategies protect credibility and separate the message from the messenger.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might say, "Sales were down this quarter" without specifically noting who was responsible. Sales were simply down. If, however, you ask, "How does the sales manager explain the decline in sales?" you have specifically connected an individual with the negative news. While we may want to specifically connect tasks and job responsibilities to individuals and departments, in terms of language, each strategy has distinct results.

In collectivist cultures, where the community's well-being is promoted or valued above that of the individual, face-saving strategies are common communicative strategies.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In Japan, for instance, to confront someone directly is perceived as humiliation— a great insult. In the United States, greater emphasis is placed on individual performance, and responsibility may be more directly assessed.

If our goal is to solve a problem and preserve the relationship, then consideration of a face-saving strategy should be one option a skilled business communicator considers when addressing negative news or

information.

2d. Empathy

Communication involves not only the words we write or speak, but how and when we write or say them. The way we communicate also carries meaning, and empathy for the individual involves attending to this aspect of interaction.

Empathetic listening involves listening to both the literal and implied meanings within a message. It's possible that the implied meaning might involve understanding what has led this person to feel this way. Strong **self and social awareness skills** can help you better understand this meaning. You may need to put yourself in the other person's shoes to truly comprehend their message.

By paying attention to feelings and emotions associated with content and information, we can build relationships and address conflict more constructively. In management, negotiating conflict is a common task and empathy is one strategy to consider when attempting to resolve issues.

2e. Managing Your Emotions

Have you ever seen red, or perceived a situation through rage, anger, or frustration? Then you know that you cannot see or think clearly when you are experiencing strong emotions.

There will be times in the work environment when emotions run high. Your awareness of them can help you clear your mind and choose to wait until the moment has passed to tackle the challenge.

"Never speak or make a decision in anger" is one common saying that holds true, but not all emotions involve fear, anger, or frustration.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A job loss can be a sort of professional death for many, and the sense of loss can be profound. The loss of a colleague to a layoff while retaining your position can bring pain as well as relief, and a sense of "survivor's guilt."

Emotions can be contagious in the workplace, and fear of the unknown can influence people to act in irrational ways. The wise business communicator can recognize when emotions are on edge in themselves or others, and choose to wait to communicate, problem-solve, or negotiate until after the moment has passed.

3. Active Listening Tips

The following strategies can also help you with conflict management by specifically targeting **active listening** when you are giving or receiving criticism in an evaluation context.

Recall that active listening involves more than passively receiving information; it requires that you engage with the speaker to demonstrate your attention.



TERM TO KNOW

Active Listening

A communication technique in which the listener sends constant feedback to the speaker, indicating that the speaker's message has been received and understood or interpreted as intended.

3a. Listen without Interrupting

If you are on the receiving end of an evaluation, start by listening without interruption. Interruptions can be internal and external, and warrant further discussion.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If your supervisor starts to discuss a point and you immediately start debating the point in your mind, you are paying attention to yourself and what you think they said or are going to say, and not that which is actually being communicated. This gives rise to misunderstandings and will cause you to lose valuable information you need to understand and address the issue at hand.

External interruptions may involve your attempt to get a word in edgewise, and may change the course of the conversation. Let the other person speak while you listen, and if you need to take notes to focus your thoughts, take clear notes of what is said, also noting points to revisit later. External interruptions can also take the form of a telephone ringing, a "text message has arrived" chime, or a coworker dropping by in the middle of the conversation.

As an effective business communicator, you know all too well to consider the context and climate of the communication when approaching the delicate subject of evaluations or criticism:

- Choose a time and place free from interruption.
- Choose one outside the common space where there may be many observers.
- Turn off your cell phone.
- Choose face-to-face communication instead of an impersonal email.

By providing a space free of interruption, you are displaying respect for the individual and the information.

3b. Determine the Speaker's Intent

We have discussed previews as a normal part of conversation, and in this context they play an important role. People want to know what is coming and generally dislike surprises, particularly when the context of an evaluation is present. If you are on the receiving end, you may need to ask a clarifying question if it doesn't count as an interruption.

You may also need to take notes and write down questions that come to mind to address when it is your turn to speak. As a manager, be clear and positive in your opening and lead with praise. You can find one point, even if it is only that the employee consistently shows up to work on time, to highlight before transitioning to a performance issue.

3c. Indicate Your Are Listening

In mainstream U.S. culture, eye contact is a signal that you are listening and paying attention to the person speaking. Take notes, nod your head, or lean forward to display interest and listening.

Strong **self and social awareness skills** can help you ensure you are sending the right signals. Less attention to details like this could mean sending nonverbal cues that are negative. You want to be aware of your actions at all times.

Regardless of whether you are the employee receiving the criticism or the supervisor delivering it, displaying listening behavior engenders a positive climate that helps mitigate the challenge of negative news or constructive criticism.

3d. Paraphrase

Restate the main points to paraphrase what has been discussed. This verbal display allows for clarification and acknowledges receipt of the message.

If you are the employee, summarize the main points and consider steps you will take to correct the situation. If none come to mind or you are nervous and are having a hard time thinking clearly, state the main point out loud and ask if you can provide solution steps and strategies at a later date. You can request a follow-up meeting if appropriate, or indicate you will respond in writing via email to provide the additional information.

If you are the supervisor, restate the main points to ensure that the message was received, as not everyone hears everything that is said or discussed the first time it is presented. Stress can impair listening, and paraphrasing the main points can help address this common response.

4. Managing Relationships After Conflict

The following strategies focus on how you can move forward after you experience conflict or a tense situation with your boss, employee, or colleague.

4a. If You Agree

If an apology is well-deserved, offer it. Communicate clearly what will change or indicate when you will respond with specific strategies to address the concern.

As a manager, you will want to formulate a plan that addresses the issue and outlines responsibilities as well as timeframes for corrective action.

As an employee, you will want specific steps you can both agree on that will serve to solve the problem. Clear communication and acceptance of responsibility demonstrates maturity and respect.

4b. If You Disagree

If you disagree, focus on the points or issue and not on personalities. Do not bring up past issues and keep the conversation focused on the task at hand. You may want to suggest, now that you better understand their position, a follow-up meeting to give you time to reflect on the issues. You may want to consider involving a third party, investigating to learn more about the issue, or taking time to cool off.

Do not respond in anger or frustration; instead, always display professionalism. If the criticism is unwarranted, consider that the information they have may be flawed or biased, and consider ways to learn more about the case to share with them, searching for a mutually beneficial solution.

If other strategies to resolve the conflict fail, consider contacting your human resources department to learn more about due process procedures at your workplace. Display respect and never say anything that would reflect poorly on yourself or your organization. Words spoken in anger can have a lasting impact and are impossible to retrieve or take back.

4c. Learn from Experience

Every communication interaction provides an opportunity for learning if you choose to see it. Sometimes the lessons are situational and may not apply in future contexts. Other times the lessons learned may well serve you across your professional career. Taking notes for yourself to clarify your thoughts, much like a journal, serves to document and help you see the situation more clearly.

Recognize that some aspects of communication are intentional, and may communicate meaning, even if that meaning is hard to understand. Also, know that some aspects of communication are unintentional, and may not imply meaning or design.

People make mistakes. They say things they should not have said. Emotions are revealed that are not always rational, and not always associated with the current context. A challenging morning at home can spill over into the work day and someone's bad mood may have nothing to do with you.

Try to distinguish between what you can control and what you cannot, and always choose professionalism.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **conflict** is a part of every workplace and must be navigated skillfully. Common **conflict management strategies** include **avoidance**, **supportive instead of defensive communication**, **face-saving instead of face-detracting** techniques, **empathy**, and **managing your emotions**.

You also learned a number of **active listening tips** that aid successful conflict management by improving communication. These tips include **listening without interrupting**, **determining the speaker's intent**, **indicating you are listening**, and **paraphrasing**. Finally, you learned some strategies for **managing relationships after conflict** has been resolved, whether you **agree** with the resolution or **disagree** with it. Regardless, it is important to **learn from experience** and apply what you have learned to future conflicts.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This tutorial has been adapted from "Business Communication for Success" Version 1.0 by Scott McLean. Copyright 2010. ISBN 978-1-4533-2742-5 (Licensee Product: Workplace Communication), reprinted with permission from FlatWorld.



TERMS TO KNOW

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