

Dealing With Conflict

Transforming Aggravation into an Organizational Asset



Interpersonal conflict in the workplace is inevitable. Avoided, allowed to fester or managed ineptly, it infests the workplace, strangles creative energy and kills productivity and innovation. Mutual respect and trust, the soil in which excellence blossoms, cannot exist where unmanaged conflict consumes the light.

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Introduction

This is not about thoughtful debate, principled disagreement or the respectful consideration of other points of view. It is about the kind of conflict that provokes hot tears, hurt feelings, painful rumination and, if not properly attended to, poisonous resentment. It is about the turmoil that arises in every group—the conflict that everyone dreads and wants to avoid. It is about how to approach conflict with confidence and to deal with it expertly. This chapter is about how to transform conflict from a dreaded inevitability into an opportunity for personal and organizational growth.

Here are some practical suggestions for the manager who must deal with conflict that has erupted between subordinates. The crisis may come to the manager's attention in any number of ways. One of the aggrieved parties may complain. A career gossip may drop by the manager's office bearing gifts. While nothing may be said directly, the pouting, the averted eyes and the dubious insistence that nothing is wrong may signal that bruised feelings lurk just beneath the surface. When such storms blow in, the leader must know how to calm them. Poorly managed, conflict is a corrosive blight that shorts critical circuits. Resolved expertly, it is a powerful solder that welds bristling wires into robust networks.

Prepare for it

When queried, every organizational leader admits that interpersonal conflict is a frequent disruption, an inevitable distraction. Organizational upheaval always draws a crowd of partisans and voyeurs. The real work slides while onlookers gawk and posture, waiting for the badgered manager to ride in and restore calm. While acknowledging conflict's recurrent appearance, leaders rarely develop and publicize their plan for managing it. This uncomfortable avoidance means that every eruption elicits an impulsive emotional response. Leadership consistency is forfeited.

As soon as you have clarified it in your own mind, announce your plan for conflict management to your team. Make it clear that you view conflict as an inevitable byproduct of human interaction—not the end of the world. Insist that aggrieved parties attempt to resolve their differences before involving you. With few exceptions, going behind a colleague's back to the boss is a dreadful mistake. Warn your team that you will require all petitioners to go on the record before you will take any action. A short presentation about your approach to interpersonal conflict will clarify expectations, decrease misunderstandings and minimize the damage that unbridled conflict leaves in its wake.

Know when to sit back

Some interpersonal conflict is best ignored. The routine grind of daily life produces enough emotional abrasions to ensure a plentiful supply of raw nerves, distemper and uncalled-for snarls. Increased sensitivities, wounded feelings and petulant withdrawals make regular, if temporary, appearances in every group. Very few people are a joy to be around every minute of every day. The misguided attempt to understand and eliminate such background noise is tiring and unproductive.

Then there are those committed antagonists whose resentments and baleful expectations have fixed their positions in stone. They have made lifelong enemies. Flexibility is not an option. They are dug in. For them, compromise is a weakness that their enemies will exploit. The suggestion of reconciliation is an outrage. Conflict that has petrified hearts and minds over the years is best excavated and shipped away. Picking at ossified attitudes will only dull the tools needed for more productive work.

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When it is clear that a valuable member of your team is having a trying day, encourage colleagues to ignore their moodiness. Set an example by remaining unaffected. Stop asking what is wrong. Refuse to indulge in speculative gossip behind the vexed struggler's back. Most troubled persons are embarrassed when they realize that their dark mood has contaminated the group and become an issue for others. They just want to be left alone.

When you come across those who have identified each other as enemies for life, decide who brings more value and evict the lesser contributor. Don't attempt to promote reconciliation with motivational blather about working together. Move them to opposite corners of the organization to minimize their tiresome clashes, if that is possible. Focus on the interpersonal conflict that offers greater potential for resolution and organizational growth.

Know when to react

Some interpersonal conflicts quickly escalate into organizational emergencies. Intentional harassment, intimidation by a superior and fits of temper that will likely worsen or recur if not promptly contained fall into this category. These are not the unintentional slights that annoy; they are emotional assaults, the brandishing of words as deadly weapons. Emotional battery—if not promptly coupled with some painful consequence—bruises the victim and inflames the batterer beyond complete healing. Let too much time pass and a lasting scar is the best you can hope for. When you learn of such an assault, react immediately. Document the incident, reassure and protect the victim and call the assailant to account right away. This is no time to become angry or to settle for defensive rationalizations. Announce that such behavior is inappropriate and that it will not be tolerated. Document your investigation, your conclusions and your actions and forward these documents to the appropriate organizational authorities. Unsupervised, bullies terrorize our playgrounds; unchallenged, they foul our workplaces. Never pledge confidentiality beforehand

It masquerades as a reasonable request. An interested party wants to share something in confidence. The boss should know what is really going on behind his or her back, but no one must ever know where the inside information came from. Because of the information's sensitivity and the need for absolute secrecy, the fervent confessor will only divulge this vital information if confidentiality is assured. Does this sound familiar?

Get over this notion that people approaching you in confidence are doing so because they respect you and want to do you a

favor. They are almost always advancing their own agendas. They hope to influence and persuade. Their real motivation, if made public, would prove embarrassing. These secrecy mavens hope to so taint your judgment that you will form an opinion or come to a decision they favor. And they want that to happen without anyone suspecting that they had anything to do with it. This dishonorable strategy is employed every day with considerable success. For many, this is simply the way the world works. These folk believe that the real deals are always made under the table. If others come to view you as a leader most effectively influenced in secret, no one—least of all those moles undermining your credibility—will trust you. When a colleague asks for a pledge of confidentiality before getting to the point, refuse to agree to that condition. Explain that your colleague will have to trust your judgment. After you have heard the person out, then you can decide whether the information is best held in confidence or shared with others. Threatened with exposure, closet lobbyists will stop pestering you behind the scenes, seek a more pliable puppet or go public with their position. Those committed to sustained organizational excellence strive to live and work in the light.

Every leader in the world is baited with gossip morsels in return for a prior pledge of confidentiality. It is a trap. Don't bite.

Beware requests to ventilate

The open expression of frustration enjoys an undeserved reputation as a healthy coping strategy. Saying outrageous things during a fit of pique is supposed to make one feel better. But this invitation to unrestrained expression actually makes matters worse. Road rage and other destructive expressions of outrage are the predictable consequences of a misguided tolerance for excessive ventilation in everyday life. Recall the last time you said something in anger. In spite of the momentary relief that nasty belch provided, would it not have been better left unsaid? Of course.

It is true that the decision to withdraw to a private place to erupt may be a healthier option, but angry ventilation is never the healthiest option. And what often passes for a benign request to ventilate is really just a covert attempt to influence. These folk want you to feel responsible for their distress, to feel the need to do something to make them feel better. They want to ensnare you in their web of disruption. They want to augment their efforts to induce mayhem with your power and influence. Does encouraging ventilation still seem like such a good idea?

Reinforce the notion that private ventilation is better than public explosion, but stop short of encouraging ventilation as the best alternative. Begin to explore healthier alternatives as soon as the passion ebbs. Emphasize that angry displays in the workplace always diminish the ranter, frighten bystanders and discourage healthy disagreement and risk-taking. Emotional excess encourages additional emotional excess. Let yourself go, and the next time you will let yourself go further.

Stamp out the emotion first

Conflicting desires, differing opinions, competing goals and contrasting perceptions are not the problems. The unsettling emotions that accompany and exaggerate our differences are the problems. The emotional infernos ignited by conflict are like other wild fires—fascinating to watch from a safe distance, frightening up close and harder to put out than to start. Emotional fires must be extinguished before the conflicts that fueled them can be examined and defused. Emotional flames that burn too long sear relationships and singe everyone in the neighborhood. Full restoration may become impossible. For these reasons, every emotional blaze that breaks out in the workplace is an emergency. It must be contained right away.

Isolate angry flame-throwers quickly. Accept their feelings. Encourage them to write a private memorandum about how they feel. (Such memos should never be sent to anyone.) Be careful not to stir the situation further by becoming upset yourself, by taking sides prematurely or by encouraging the excessive airing of grievances. Gently point out the dangers of unrestrained impulses. Allow some time to pass. Employ temporary distractions. As feelings start to subside, encourage those involved to begin writing down their observations about the incident. Keep requesting revisions until all hostile speculations about motive and all acerbic editorializing are eliminated from these eye witness accounts.

Insist that complainants take some

An upset employee storms in. Something is not right and something needs to be done. This disgruntled colleague expects you to listen, to agree and to set matters straight. After complaining, many employees conclude they have done their part. It is now management's responsibility. Do not accept this assignment. Listen carefully and take some notes. Acknowledge the grouser's strong feelings. Ask whether he or she has voiced these concerns to the offender. If, as will be likely, everyone but the offender has been informed, offer to meet with the two of them. If, as will be likely, the indignant petitioner is further incensed by this suggestion, declare that you will do nothing further until he or she has taken some

personal responsibility, either in person or in writing. If you give in to the temptation to "take charge," you will quickly discover that such well-intentioned efforts usually fail.

Consider both sides before taking a position

Aggrieved persons, convinced that they have been wronged and that it is your obligation to take up their cause, can be particularly compelling. It is easy to get swept up in their tempest, to accept the mantle of advocate and to become disoriented in the whirlwind of their distress. You feel their pain. You want to do whatever you can to help. You grab the nearest length of rope, join their posse and ride out in hot pursuit of retribution before the obvious dawns on you. You have only considered one side. Listen carefully. Take notes. That will convey your sincerity and remind you of the need to remain objective, to investigate, to weigh dispassionately and to reserve judgment. Take a moment to accept their feelings and then ask the accuser to summarize his enemy's position. Several moments of pained silence will follow. The complainer will then grudgingly admit that he has not yet brought the issue to the other person's attention, or that he could care less what the other person thinks or feels. Sometimes, such a question will incline the complainer to begin considering the other person's point of view. When this happens, it is a moment to treasure. Talented leaders quietly persist in asking clarifying questions, especially when resolute persuaders would rather not consider the flaws in their approach or the weaknesses in their arguments.

Do not permit ambushes

Every bureaucratic jungle conceals a sizeable force of guerilla fighters. Such combatants have no interest in conflict resolution, in building long-term relationships or in being team players. They lust only for the kill. And they love to use managers to lure their marks unwittingly into their traps. Under the guise of wanting to discuss the problem, these schemers will sometimes arrange for a group conference with the manager. The quarry is summoned to a meeting without explanation. The ambushed employee, embarrassed in front of the manager, is initially speechless and then furious and later dismayed. If the manager is not quick to recognize and point out what just happened, a troublemaker is rewarded, a team player is wounded and mutual trust sustains a mortal blow.

If you learn that a member of your staff is planning to ambush a colleague, warn the plotter that this strategy is inconsistent with your team's values and the growth of long-

term relationships. Forbid such behavior. If an ambush occurs without warning, repel the assault and clarify your position on ambushes at the next team meeting. Confrontation, conducted honorably, is critical to organizational health. But persons being confronted deserve the right to collect their thoughts, clarify their positions and make their cases. None of us wants to be judged solely on the way we react when caught off guard.

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Remember that perception is (perceived) reality

Much is made of the observation that we all confuse perception and reality. If we perceive that we have received poor service, we have. If we perceive that others have done us wrong, they have. If we perceive that our efforts are adequate, our opinions informed, and our actions justified, they are. The elevation of the individual (and individual perceptions) in our culture encourages freedom, and limits the stultifying influence of conformity. It also promotes a self-centeredness that distorts perspective and sanctions misperception. Most interpersonal conflict is based on misperception. This realization points to several effective strategies for resolving conflict.

Accept the legitimacy of the discontented person's feelings. Begin clarifying the complainer's position using the term, "perception," as in, "Let me make sure I understand your position. It is your perception that . . ." When you are done, the employee feels accepted and understood. That the current turmoil may be the result of perceptions will dawn on the employee. If perceptions are involved, then misperceptions are at least theoretically possible. That misperceptions by one or both parties may have played a role can now be openly discussed. Once the possibility of misperception is entertained, several options for face-saving resolutions naturally emerge.

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Ask for data

In controversial matters, those with the least knowledge are usually the most opinionated. Those who have studied, consulted and considered all sides adopt thoughtful positions and welcome challenges to their views. They accept that others may have come to equally valid, if different, conclusions. Those who unquestioningly adopt positions based on political or emotional grounds, recognizing that their fragile opinions are best left undisturbed, repel every probe with an exaggerated parry. The most innocent question is a threat. Unexamined opinions are like the boxed remains in our basements. Essentially worthless, we hold onto them because they meant something once and because discarding them is too much trouble.

When an employee angrily alleges unfairness, wrongdoing or some insulting personal affront, listen carefully, acknowledge the distress and then quietly ask for the evidence. The distressed employee will almost never have it. Your respectful question will convey a valuable lesson at one of life's most teachable moments. This is a lesson rarely mastered. No matter how arresting, emotional arousal is no substitute for a compelling case.

Focus on behavior instead of motive

It is not just what others do, but why we think they do it that packs such an emotional wallop. We never really know why others behave the way they do, but we can't keep ourselves from speculating. That we might be wrong about their motives is a possibility only reluctantly considered, and then only after the blinding passion of the moment has subsided. This tendency to react to another's presumed motive is often the spark that kindles the tinderbox of volatile emotion.

It is not that our speculations are always mistaken; our conclusions may be right on target. But assertions about motive cannot be independently verified. An emphasis on motive shifts the conflict from what happened to why it happened. A series of stalemating verbal rituals ensues. Every assertion provokes a denial. This friction produces heat but no light.

Begin your intervention by admitting that the speculations about motive may be correct. Then point out that whether those speculations are correct does not matter. Only observable behavior matters. Encourage those involved to document objectionable behavior. Editorial comments and speculations about motive have no place in the description or during the confrontation discussion. Once offensive behavior is carefully

described, it becomes evidence. Evidence supports conclusions, and conclusions justify significant consequences. And significant consequences are the best behavioral modifiers.

Attach consequences to bad behavior

There are those who fear that we are abandoning the social graces, our good manners and the ability to engage in civil discourse. We could behave better than we do. The world—and our workplaces—would be a better place if we did. While the rude and inconsiderate antics tolerated in most work environments pale in comparison with the depravity of some Roman emperors and other historical despots, bad behavior is still common. It is destructive and it will worsen if left unchallenged.

Adults who misbehave at work obviously do not possess adequate internal behavioral controls. These immature persons rely on environmental constraints. If the barricades are not obvious, unrestrained emotion will push these persons off course. Vexed ruffians, frightened by their own lack of control and the absence of external limits, rage on until they exhaust themselves. Unbridled, they careen through our lives, disrupting the peace and leaving a trail of emotional debris.

It is easier to attach significant consequences to inappropriate behavior than you might think. No one enjoys being called on the carpet. No one wants to be written up. A straightforward and unemotional confrontation in the presence of a witness is an unforgettable experience when you are on the receiving end. During these moments of truth, explain what will happen if these outbursts persist. Do not bluff. Temper outbursts in the work environment are like exploding land mines. It does not take many of these to bring the entire group to a halt.

Find a way for everyone to save face

Strong negative emotional arousal is painful. When accompanied by petulant behavior or ill-advised commentary, it is downright embarrassing. During temperamental outbursts, indignation trumps insight. The screamer plunges ahead, oblivious to others' negative reactions. The exhibitionist's first defense is always that their outbursts are justified. They are someone else's fault. If things worked the way they should, these tantrums would not be necessary. But in spite of their protestations, most of these folks will eventually feel deeply ashamed of how they have behaved. This is a good thing. However, unlimited shame is not a good thing. People excessively embarrassed withdraw completely or indulge in more provocative behavior. Neither option is good for the organization.

When your investigation is complete, legitimize the victim's feelings, recognize his courage in coming forward and assure him that appropriate action will be forthcoming. Discuss how he might respond more effectively to such an incident in the future. Your prompt, thorough and objective response along with the opportunity to learn new skills will encourage and inspire him.

Acknowledge the provocateur's frustration, but make it clear that her behavior was not appropriate. This approach invites an early apology for inappropriate behavior while legitimizing the view that her frustration in this circumstance was understandable. The shame she must (and should) endure is tolerable. And she can save face. The incident does not represent a total loss.

Consider possible compromises from the start

Emotional turmoil is self-perpetuating. Anger and resentment breed tortured rumination. Rumination foments additional anger and resentment. Aggravated people spend hours circling in this mental holding pattern, reliving the insult, considering what they might have said or done or what they would love to do. Strapped in a self-imposed purgatory, all mental energy is focused on self-flagellation and resentful fantasy. Possible resolutions are ignored or rejected amid the thunderheads of emotion boiling around them. Possible solutions can be suggested too quickly. More often, aggrieved persons cling to their futile rage too long. In this situation, the manager's call to action offers the welcome relief of some productive activity.

While you seek to understand your employee's perceptions and reactions, begin reflecting on the available options. When the anger has run its course or after you have heard the same recital for the fifth time, ask the distressed person whether he believes he has made his position clear. Offering a summary of your understanding of his position and inviting his clarification demonstrates your sincere effort to understand. When he agrees that you have got it, move directly to the available options. Inquire about which alternatives he has considered. This approach promptly engages stressed persons in the meaningful work of conflict resolution.

Suggesting simplistic solutions prematurely is not helpful. Wallowing indefinitely in paralyzing turmoil is not helpful either

When he can think of no more options, start through your list. Unemotional persons always see more clearly and identify more possibilities. Some possibilities will be discarded right way. Explore which compromises might be acceptable. Clarify next steps. Come up with a specific action plan. Decide on a time line. Suggesting simplistic solutions prematurely is not helpful. Wallowing indefinitely in paralyzing turmoil is not helpful either.

Come up with a specific plan

Just talking about a problem is not enough. Every episode of significant interpersonal conflict should lead to the implementation of a specific action plan, even if that plan is to do nothing. It is true that doing nothing is often the best option. There is a huge difference, though, between doing nothing by default and doing nothing as an active choice. The helpless do nothing because they can do nothing else. Assertive persons do nothing because, after considering all the options, they conclude that doing nothing is the best option. Thoughtful consideration will usually demand that something specific be done in response to the perceived wrong.

After feelings have been explored and accepted, and possible compromises have been considered, you will need to develop a plan acceptable to all parties. A sincere apology may suffice. An apology for “any misunderstanding” permits both parties to save face. A specific agreement about how the parties will strive to avoid similar disagreements in the future is frequently the ideal solution.

You may have to engage in some shuttle diplomacy. If the parties in the conflict were mature and experienced enough to work this through themselves, they would never have involved you. This is not just a problem; it is a significant opportunity. Effort invested in resolving conflict, teaching relationship skills and in modeling dispassionate problem-solving are among the most gratifying aspects of the leadership role. Leaders with these skills are cherished, frequently sought out as mentors and more at peace at work and in life.

See the plan through

Plans are only as good as their implementation. If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the better path is implementation. Anxious to put conflict behind them, leaders regularly delude themselves that their job is done when the warriors bury their hatchets. No weapon is easier to retrieve than a buried hatchet. That is why it is important that the organizational leader who brokers a deal sees to it that the deal sticks.

Agree on scheduled follow-ups as part of the original deal. Do not fail to follow up as promised. If fine-tuning is required, jump back in before sour notes destroy the harmony. When both parties confirm that the deal is intact, pour on the praise. To the degree that it can be accomplished without embarrassing the players, encourage testimonials. Few organizational stories are more motivating than examples of resolved conflict.

Treat troublemakers differently

Most of the conflict in the workplace is triggered inadvertently by people of good will. They are tired or preoccupied or sensitive, and some small friction occurs and they flare. But all workplaces are plagued with a few career troublemakers. They create aggravation wherever they are. No one can get along with them. Miserable themselves, they have little regard for other folk’s feelings. Turmoil reassures them. The world really is rotten after all. These folk are usually not amenable to counsel. Religious conversion is about the only hope they have for more satisfying and productive lives. Coddling these snakes, particularly with kid gloves, is misguided.

When you conclude that an employee is a troublemaker, begin making the case for termination. Do not let things ride. Do not avoid your responsibilities as an organization leader by writing average evaluations. Do not recommend this person for another job. Do not allow your emotions to interfere with the process of holding this person accountable. This means that you must not permit your frustration to influence your interactions or to spoil the documentation that will eventually rid your company of this destructive pest.

Get over it and move on

There are some problems that cannot be solved to everyone’s satisfaction. When every reasonable thing that can be done has been done, additional deliberative flailing is counterproductive.

Partial solutions—even chronic conflict—must sometimes be accepted, incorporated into the texture of organizational reality and treasured as a useful reminder of our imperfections.

In real life, possibility should always trump perfection. It is a lesson some never learn. Confronted by intractable enemies, responsible leaders must eventually declare a winner and require that the loser accept that decision. Otherwise, a miserable paralysis will sap motivation and diminish productivity.

When you find yourself in this predicament, act like a judge. Inquire whether each of the warring parties has made his case and whether there are any new issues to be considered. Advise everyone that you will withdraw briefly to consider all of the facts before announcing your final decision. Seek your superior's concurrence before you announce your decision to ensure a favorable appellate decision when the inevitable appeal is filed. Acknowledging that all sides have merit, announce your decision and your expectation of immediate, full and good-humored compliance by all parties. Remind the winners and losers that both gloating and pouting are discouraged. Then move on.

Delegate and mentor others

The need for conflict management skills never entirely goes away, but the most capable leaders spend less time managing interpersonal conflict as their careers progress. They model, teach, delegate and mentor. They want their younger colleagues to become less dependent on them over time. They understand that interpersonal conflict is best managed promptly, at the level it occurs, and by those persons directly involved. These leaders are happy to consult but reluctant to intervene. They view their less experienced colleagues' fumbles as learning opportunities. They initiate informal but thoughtful analyses and ask how bungled situations might have been better managed. They are quick to praise any evidence of personal growth. They are quick to offer solicited advice and slow to offer unsolicited advice. These are the leaders we all admire and seek to emulate.

Few significant leadership skills can be acquired except through painful experience. Conflict management

is certainly one of those. Many of life's treasures are best appreciated by passing them on to others. This is true of this essential leadership skill. The best conflict managers end up managing very little conflict in their daily professional lives. They concentrate instead on observing, listening, foreseeing and mentoring.

Conclusion

Interpersonal conflict in the workplace is inevitable. Avoided, allowed to fester or managed ineptly, it infests the workplace, strangles creative energy and kills productivity and innovation. Mutual respect and trust, the soil in which excellence blossoms, cannot exist where unmanaged conflict consumes the light.

Contained and vented appropriately, interpersonal conflict is transformed from a deadly gas to the harmless exhaust of a smooth running organizational engine. Capable leaders view conflict as reassuring evidence that internal combustion is occurring, and as an opportunity to look for the silent leaks in the exhaust system that, if not discovered early and sealed off, will eventually prove lethal.

No leader ever learns all there is to know about conflict management. Some never learn enough. The avoidance of conflict, the failure to leave your comfort zone and the hesitancy to try a different approach will shuttle you to the realm of lower-tier leaders. The implementation of these guidelines, regular consultation with your mentors and the insight that can only be acquired through painful experience will set you apart, deepen the sense of meaning your work affords and generate the self-confidence that accompanies mastery.

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