

Unit 13: Resolving Team Conflict

Conflict Is Normal. Deal with It.

Conflict is a fact of life. And a fact of teams. When it comes to teams. In fact, if you avoid dealing with a difficult situation, it's not going to go away. In all likelihood, avoiding it will just make the situation worse. That's why conflict resolution is a critical skill for both team leaders and team members.

Most of us dislike conflict. We want everything to go smoothly at work, and we want everyone to like one another and to like us. But is that a realistic scenario? Most of the time, it isn't.

And indeed, conflict can be a very positive thing for you and your workgroup. Why? If you try to ignore all conflict and keep the anger and frustration tamped down, it can smolder underground. Suddenly, and when you might least expect it, it blazes up out of control. This creates a problem that never needed to happen in the first place. Working through conflict can uncover creative and innovative ideas that you may not have heard about otherwise.

A manager who avoids conflict sets a workgroup or an organization on a crash course. For example, maybe you have an employee who is constantly late for work, but you let the situation ride without dealing with it. Not only will you reinforce bad work habits, but you will lose the respect of those who see you that you are not dealing with the problem.

On the other hand, you can't go around confronting everyone and everything. If you scold an employee who is late for work for the first time, you may not earn respect and be seen as a tyrant. This leads to the questions: when do you ignore and when do you confront?

Follow these guidelines as you consider when to get involved in the conflict:

- An employee's performance gets in the way of your organization's goals or slows down production.
- An employee's actions block your own success. Ask yourself: Can I ignore this?
- Other employees ask you to get involved. Internal arguing can cause low morale.
- The people involved ask you to get involved because they can't resolve their differences themselves.

Before you get involved, pause first. Ask yourself if you are doing anything that contributes to this problem.

Even members of the highest-performing team will occasionally find themselves locked in conflict. Sometimes you, as a team leader, are reluctant to ask for your team's help in resolving conflicts because you feel that the burden for conflict resolution rests entirely on your shoulders. This is not only inaccurate; it can also hurt you and your group in many ways. Team leaders who make themselves the sole referees and harmonizers for their teams are headed for disaster.



Resolving Internal Conflict

When a team is in internal conflict, what can you do? Below are several guidelines that will look quite similar to the problem-solving methods we discussed earlier.

1 - Be sincere.

Sincerity is the ideal way to resolve conflicts. If you cannot be sincere, then at least try to be authentic. Being authentic means not hiding behind masks or false identities. Show up as yourself.

2 - Identify the real conflict or challenge.

Often the real conflict is deeper than the problem that is visibly present at the time. Using good problem-solving skills, be sure you identify the real problem. You cannot resolve the conflict until you define the problem.

3 - Don't adopt a "must-win" attitude.

Having a must-win attitude may not help. High-performing teams are also highly competitive. But sometimes that competitive spirit does lead to conflict. People will defend their position or go down fighting. Remember that conflicts are resolved, not won.

4 - Identify possible resolutions.

You can resolve most situations in a variety of ways. As the team leader, you may need to create those choices and offer them to the conflicting parties to resolve their differences.

5 - Evaluate your options and pick a course of action.

Choose the best workable choice from the possibilities you identify. The goal is to choose the solution that will offer the best course of action for you, the team leader, and the other team members.

6 - Communicate openly and fairly.

Be sure you listen actively and communicate openly with all those involved in the conflict. All parties need to feel confident that you have heard their point of view and are now ready to listen to yours. Use your communication skills to remove anger, be clear, and be fair. Your goal is a commitment to act on the best course of action.

7 - Preserve relationships.

Recognize the relationships within the team and preserve them if at all possible. You do not want disagreements to fester and go unresolved. Eventually, that scenario will destroy relationships.

To provide a temporary time-out for people who feel they are at a stalemate, ask questions such as these:

- How do you think we are doing?
- Are we making progress on this issue?
- Do you feel your concerns are being heard?

Preventing Internal Conflict

To prevent internal conflict, keep in mind what Dale Carnegie said:

- Talk about the other person's interests.
- Be genuinely interested in people.
- Ask WIIFM (What's In It For Me?).
- Make others feel important.
- See things from the other person's perspective.
- Smile!