

Seven Strategies for Managing Conflict

Wherever there are people, there will always be conflict. It's a simple fact of life. Opinions vary, and miscommunications and misunderstandings occur. People have differing values and priorities, and most of us resist change. All of these things create conflict in our life and our work. Conflict itself is not the problem, but rather how we deal with it. The good news is that effective conflict management strategies can be learned and mastered. While there are many different types of conflict, let's discuss some strategies for managing interpersonal conflict.

Deal with it. Most people prefer to avoid conflict. I've heard from many nurses who have actually quit their jobs rather than attempt to resolve an interpersonal conflict at work. This is almost never a good solution, and it usually leads to feelings of regret and guilt. Besides, if you quit every time you have a conflict on the job, you'll be quitting every job you ever have in a short period of time.

Conflict needs to be dealt with. If you ignore or avoid it, it can lead to increased stress and unresolved feelings of anger, hostility, and resentment. When you learn to manage conflict effectively, you'll be happier and healthier, physically and emotionally. You'll have better relationships. You'll be a better leader, a better team member, and a better person. You'll gain respect, improve your self-esteem and build courage. You'll get more of what you want.

Think it through. Before addressing the person you have a conflict with, consider discussing the situation with an objective friend or family member. This can help to clarify issues and needs. Seek feedback and advice in dealing with the situation. But be careful not to rely on the opinion of an involved third party who may have his or her own agenda. Plan your strategy, including what you want to say, and then write it down and rehearse it. Create a note card, if necessary, with your main talking points. This will help you to feel more in control and stay on target.

Talk it out, face-to-face. Meeting in person can be intimidating, but it is often the best way to go. Face-to-face communication is more effective than other forms because it allows for an active exchange of information. It gives you the opportunity to make use of the handshake, a smile, eye contact, hand gestures, and other important body language. It also allows you to observe important nonverbal cues from the other party. Set aside time to meet with the person face-to-face at a mutually convenient time and place. When possible, meet on "neutral turf" rather than one of your offices so no one has the "home court" advantage.

E-mail and letter writing should not be used, if possible, to resolve conflict or to discuss sensitive topics, problems, or hurt feelings. It is too impersonal and indirect and increases the risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding. A phone call is the next best thing when in-person meetings aren't possible.

Use a mediator if necessary. If a situation is particularly volatile or troublesome and other efforts have not worked, you might invite a neutral third party, such as a supervisor, to act as a mediator if this is agreeable to all concerned. A mediator can remain objective, listen to both sides, and facilitate resolution and compromise. Be firm on your objectives; you're there to resolve a conflict, not defeat an opponent.

Apologize when appropriate. Be aware of your own part in creating the conflict. If you've done something wrong or inappropriate, be willing to acknowledge it and say you're sorry, even if the conflict is not entirely a result of your actions. Sometimes you have to meet people halfway to get to where you want to go.

Choose your battles. There will always be differing opinions and ways of doing things. Decide which issues you can live with and which need addressing. If you bring up only the most important issues, you will develop credibility. On the other hand, if you make an issue about everything, you'll be labeled a

complainer. Then, when you have a legitimate beef, you will likely be ignored like the fabled boy who cried wolf.

Work to minimize conflict. Take steps to minimize conflict at work before it happens. Work hard at developing good relationships with coworkers and colleagues. Get to know people. Be friendly and sociable. Everyone has different needs and priorities and comes from different cultural backgrounds. Contrary to what you've heard, familiarity breeds respect.

Work on your own communication skills. The ability to express yourself clearly will allow you to say what's on your mind, ask for what you want and need, and get your point across. There is an expression that a problem well-stated is a problem half-solved.

Avoid troublemakers as much as possible. They will suck you in and drag you down. Don't engage in gossip or backbiting. Get the facts before jumping to conclusions about something you're heard through the grapevine. Know when it's appropriate to walk away from a confrontation, and always consider the source in the face of criticism or hurtful comments.

Conflict can't be avoided, but it can be minimized and resolved. Although avoidance sometimes seems like the easy way out, facing conflict head-on in an appropriate and professional manner will lead to better relationships, a more productive work environment, and empowerment.