

Resolving Coworker Conflicts

Coworker conflicts can be one of the most difficult forms of workplace stress. Understanding the nature of conflict, examining myths, and learning simple, conflict resolution skills can reduce conflicts and their negative toll on your job satisfaction and productivity.



THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

Workplace conflicts naturally emerge from the incompatible or opposing needs, wishes, external demands, or perceived demands of others. Conflict between coworkers can be visible in the work environment or stay hidden from others. Conflicts frequently grow worse without resolution and can be costly if they appear irreconcilable.

Although often stressful, conflict at work is normal. When managed and controlled, conflict in the workplace is beneficial because it can stimulate change and discovery, and increase productivity. Understanding accepted principles about conflict in the workplace can help you feel less victimized by it and more in control of its outcome.



MYTHS ABOUT WORKPLACE CONFLICT

■ **Myth #1: Conflict is a Bad.** In the workplace, conflict is not inherently bad. It is usually a symptom, not a problem. It is a signal to do something to manage differences. What follows is a new outcome toward the goal of seeking harmony in the workplace and improving productivity.

■ **Myth #2: Conflict is Win-Lose.** Conflict is often mistakenly viewed as an undesirable contest of wills and determination where one person wins and the other loses. This view reduces the potential benefits of conflict and can make it worse.



■ **Myth #3: Only Bad Employees Cause Conflict.** Difficult employees may contribute to conflict, but most workplace conflicts are between productive and dedicated employees. Problems in resolving conflicts, and inadequate approaches to conflict resolution, contribute to the belief that conflict must be a disciplinary matter.

EARLY INTERVENTION IS KEY

Because conflicts have the potential of becoming crises, early intervention is important. Once a crisis exists, attitudes of those in conflict become rigid. Termination of the relationship becomes the goal and the risk of physical violence may exist. Consider these keys to conflict resolution:



■ **Expect Conflicts:** Decide that conflicts will occasionally emerge in the discourse of human relationships. Don't fear conflict, rather, learn to spot its symptoms early and see opportunity in the resolution of conflict.

■ **Practice Preventative Maintenance:** "Don't let a tree grow between you and a coworker." Practice talking about your relationship with your coworker. Avoid retreating to the safety of withdrawal, avoidance, or the simplistic view that your coworker is a "bad person." These are defense mechanisms that prevent the resolution of conflict.



■ **Frequently Discuss Four Conflict Parameters;** Ask, "Do we have any concerns about: 1) communication between ourselves, our team, or the supervisor; 2) our roles and duties; 3) needs and resources for doing our job; 4) the work environment — customer stress, politics in the organization, or expectations of our work unit." Ask what contributes to conflicts in these areas. Make honesty a tradition and a tool for conflict resolution. Model openness and reward it if you are a manager or team leader. Seek solutions to identified problems, and follow up.

■ **Get Leverage on Yourself:** When conflict between you and a coworker appears without resolution, it is time to get leverage. Ask to be held accountable for resolving the conflict. This brings your performance evaluation into the equation, but without taking away your responsibility for resolving conflict. This is hard to do, but remarkable change can happen when you are held to task.

WHAT THE EAP CAN DO

The EAP can help you resolve conflicts using different approaches depending on an assessment of your struggles with a coworker. The EAP may begin by interviewing coworkers individually, or meet with you as a group before using goal-oriented approaches to resolution. Call your EAP to learn more. There is much to gain in resolving conflicts — your happiness, health, and productivity.