

How to... deal with conflict

Audrey Macnaughton, director of HR at Training and Development Consultancy Macnaughton McGregor Ltd, looks at conflict in the workplace.

WE'VE PROBABLY all experienced conflict at some point during our working lives. Whether it's the unwashed coffee cup variety or the heated disagreement about company strategy, unresolved conflict costs time and money, not to mention the creation of personal stress and heartache.

We all have a duty to stay focused and committed to the job at hand. Bad atmospheres, disruptive behaviour and rigid views all cause distractions for teams and hamper progress.

In contrast, too cosy an atmosphere in a team, where there are no debates or disagreements can also be ineffective. There is a certain level of 'discomfort' required to make sure that all angles and ideas are being considered.

This discomfort within a working team or between departments is what I call 'creative tension', as the outcome of a healthy debate is often the creation of a more appropriate solution to a problem.

So the first step in dealing with conflict effectively is to recognise that difficult situations are going to arise. Tempting though it is to do, avoiding a disagreement doesn't make it go away. It's better to be aware of conflict and make decisions about what you can do to have the best chance of a positive outcome.

Before we look at how to handle conflict situations it's worth remembering the saying "choose your battles". Not taking action in difficult situations may, on occasion, be appropriate. Perhaps where the conflict is minor and in reality doesn't have an impact on you, others or the business. A great piece of advice in these situations is to recognise your response as a conscious choice and close the issue in your mind. Otherwise these irritations have a tendency to fester and have a negative effect on you and your future dealings with the other party.

So when a difficult situation does arise how do we deal with it? Take a moment to reflect on how you respond to tricky situations. We all have habits of behaviour, for example avoiding conflict at all costs or being unperturbed by conflict and therefore having a direct and confrontational style.

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The second step in successfully dealing with conflict is to stop wishing other people would change. We all have different perspectives, ideas, thinking styles and communication habits. We all know that to be true, but we then spend time and energy wishing people would behave in the way that we want them to. You cannot change other people, the only thing you have direct control over is your behaviour and by changing the way you act often affects the way others react to you.



Disruptive behaviour can cause a distraction for teams.

Now that we've got our thinking right, how do we actually tackle a conflict situation? Here are some tips:

- Choose the right time – to manage the conversation effectively you both need to be as calm and rational as possible. If necessary take time to calm down first.
- Deal with one thing at a time – in a conflict situation there are likely to be a number of issues, especially if it has been left for some time. Once you start to speak with the other party there can be a tendency to seize the moment and get another few things off your chest. It's what I call the 'and another thing' syndrome. Focus on the key issue, get agreement and then decide if the others are necessary.
- Stay specific and factual – when emotions are running high the conversation can deteriorate into accusing and exaggerated statements, eg. "you always have to bring up that point". Resist this by taking a mental pause before you speak to assess whether the statement you are about to make is purely fact.
- Avoid reacting to unintentional remarks – in the heat of a difficult discussion remarks are going to be made that may not necessarily be what the other party means. Try to avoid reacting and stick to the key facts and the outcomes you want.
- Be flexible – if one approach isn't working then try another tack. There is nothing to be gained in just saying the same thing again and again but only louder! Examples of a change in tack could be to talk more quietly or even stay quiet until the other person runs



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out of steam.

- Don't insist on being right - there are usually several right solutions to every problem and if you reach a resolution.

This may seem to be a great deal of effort on your part but remember without resolution, conflict merely becomes an opportunity to recycle old arguments so getting your approach right is crucial.

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