

## How to manage workplace conflict

Six tips can help you handle disagreements early and effectively.



**By Cheryl Meyer**

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It is inevitable that disputes will arise in any workplace. But conflict - or the art of defusing it - can also set in motion new ideas, creativity, and development.

“It can lead people to a fuller understanding of each other” and increase trust, said Mary Lou O’Kennedy, a professional mediator with OAK Conflict Dynamics in Dublin, Ireland.

“Conflict ultimately leads to growth.” So don’t fear this tension; embrace it, and learn how to handle it.

“Organisations don’t take conflict seriously enough, and most are very conflict avoidant,” said Alex Efthymiades, director and co-founder of Consensio, a London-based consulting firm focused on conflict management and workplace mediation. This can spell disaster for organisations if they don’t tackle interpersonal squabbles early, before they fester.

“A small issue between two people that doesn’t resolve can escalate and have an impact on team morale, motivation, and on employees’ levels of engagement and wellbeing,” she added.

Workplace discord can occur for many reasons: personality clashes, in-house stress and pressure, or manager-employee friction. Communication breaks down and people “start making assumptions about other people’s intentions”, Efthymiades said. Sometimes, workers send emails or text messages that are biting or misconstrued.

“We have a lot of courage behind the keyboard,” quipped Ned Parks, founder of Aegis 360 Consulting, a leadership advisory firm in Akron, Ohio. Once a conflict germinates, the individuals involved often speak with colleagues to gain allies.

“The tension and negativity that are created become quite contagious,” noted O’Kennedy. “We are hard-wired to interpret somebody working against our interests. In our world and workplace, it’s about our psychological survival.”

Efthymiades, Parks, and O’Kennedy, all conflict-resolution specialists, offered the following six managerial tips for handling workplace discord:

**Establish internal protocols.** Organisations should establish mediation policies for handling dissension before problems arise. This sends a signal that conflict is taken seriously and institutes a process to follow when it does occur. “It is impossible to avoid all conflicts, but it is possible to build a culture where conflicts are managed productively,” Efthymiades said.

Managers can also set the stage by giving high priority to dealing with employees when conflict arises and ensuring all workers are committed to solving issues, Parks added. Also, supervisors should instil in their staff that disagreements are OK, but that respect for one another is key. “Sometimes it is messy and sometimes it is uncomfortable, but the rewards are great,” he said.

**Tackle issues early.** As a manager, don’t wait too long before addressing a brewing office spat. “Nipping things in the bud is incredibly important, because if you don’t, conflict will escalate and grow and turn into something very unmanageable,” Efthymiades said.

**Find the root cause of the problem.** Employee complaints are often not the cause of the conflict. “Nobody ever got divorced because they left the cap off the toothpaste”, even though that can be an irritant, Parks said. So ask open-ended questions, which gives people a chance to talk and makes them feel valued and appreciated. Dig deep. Dialogue is key.

**Be a referee, not a judge.** As a manager, be an impartial listener when tempers flare in-house. Talk face to face with each person involved, and choose constructive, not hostile, responses. Be flexible. Meet with employees individually first, and then together in a safe and uninterrupted environment. Once the discussion is flowing, let the parties work out the difficulties, since it is their issue to resolve. “Do not get drawn into the dispute to take sides or find solutions,” O’Kennedy advised. If you as the manager are part of the problem, ask for help — either from the human resources department or by hiring a mediator.

**Consider conflict resolution training.** Organisations are often ill-equipped to handle conflict when it arises, because supervisors don’t know what to do. The training investment will be offset by the costs of unresolved conflict, such as lost customers and workers, and the instruction gives managers tools, which in turn provide “a clear pathway for employees to address their concerns without it affecting their formal employment record”, O’Kennedy said.

**Self-manage.** Before you can manage others, you need to take a hard look at yourself. What triggers you to act defensively and behave in a way that worsens a conflict? When in discord, do you view your challengers as potential enemies or as budding partners who simply disagree with you? “If you perceive others in conflict as ‘potential partners’, then you are more likely to behave constructively in a collaborative way” and find a solution, O’Kennedy said.

*Cheryl Meyer is a freelance writer based in the US. To comment on this article or to suggest an idea for another article, contact Drew Adamek, an FM magazine senior editor, at [Andrew.Adamek@aicpa-cima.com](mailto:Andrew.Adamek@aicpa-cima.com).*