



## How to achieve calm in conflict

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**Overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the last 12 months have been marked by high levels of uncertainty, stress and anxiety. This has led to an increase in workplace conflict as individuals and organisations navigate the many pressures brought on by the pandemic.**

### **Fight, flight and freeze response**

Think about a workplace conflict you've experienced. This may relate to emails you perceived as unnecessarily critical or feeling unfairly treated at work. How did you react?

Workplace conflict makes us feel stressed and anxious. When we *perceive* a situation as potentially dangerous or threatening, an automatic and unconscious impulse to protect ourselves kicks in. This is our fight-flight-freeze (FFF) response, our evolutionary survival instinct. This stress response, our body's natural reaction to *perceived* danger or threat, instantly causes hormonal and physiological changes in our body.

Emotions associated with the fight response include irritation, annoyance, frustration, anger, aggression and rage. Flight response emotions include worry, anxiety, fear and terror. The freeze response is fight-or-flight on hold, associated with feelings of helplessness.

Do you tend to react with rage and respond with a malicious email? Do you avoid conflict and let things fester and grow? Or does conflict make you feel defenceless? You may fluctuate between all three, depending on context and who you are in conflict with.

### **Our brain and body in stress**

The stress response begins in our brain. Put simply, when we experience stress, the amygdala, our "emotional brain", prepares our body for an emergency response, and stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, prepare us to fight, flee or freeze.

When you recall a memory of conflict, do you remember how your body felt? Did your heart rate go up? Did your breathing become shallow and rapid? Did your muscles tense? These physiological changes are signs of FFF activation, along with sweaty palms, a quivering voice, and feeling numb. These physiological changes are essential when we are in real and immediate danger, but not when we are in *perceived* threat mode.

Importantly, the FFF response impairs our ability to think clearly and rationally. That is why we may say things in a fiery discussion that we later regret, "lose it" in a heated argument, or run away from

confrontation. Our active amygdala shuts down the neural pathway to our prefrontal cortex (PFC), our “thinking brain”.

The PFC is responsible for our executive function, such as planning, decision-making, problem-solving, self-control, and acting with long-term goals in mind. When our PFC shuts down, this impairs our memory, thoughts and perceptions. This is why having a conversation when we are in stress mode is unlikely to go well.

### **Self-regulation strategies**

Various self-regulation strategies will help us calm our body and brain.

#### **Recognise your triggers**

We all have triggers that will activate our stress response, such as receiving a threatening email, feeling disrespected, or fears about job security. Once triggered, we have a choice: we can *react* impulsively whilst stress hormones are flushing through our body and our thinking is impaired, or we can consciously pause, take a break, and wait until we have self-regulated before deciding how to rationally *respond*.

#### **Research-based relaxation strategies**

**Breathing exercises** regulate our central nervous system because they stop the production of stress hormones. For two minutes, take a slow breath in and an even slower breath out. Tune into your breathing as you breathe into your belly. You will feel calmer.

**Physical activity.** Any movement helps to decrease stress hormones, and different forms of physical activity work for different people. For some, it may be running, dancing or Yoga. For others, a walk in nature or around the block.

**Mindfulness meditation** also regulates our central nervous system. Effective mindfulness apps include: *Calm, Headspace, Portal, Happier, and Stop, Breathe & Think*.

#### **Positive social interactions**

We all have a natural inclination to connect to other people and positive social interactions – in-person or virtually – sustain and calm us. Whether it’s close relationships with family, friends or work colleagues, emotional support nurtures us in times of stress.

#### **Language and empathy**

During a conflict conversation, you can try two strategies to diffuse the negative emotions of others.

#### **Be aware of language**

Whether verbally or in writing, our language may inadvertently trigger someone. We need to watch our language and tone when we relay challenging information or give difficult feedback. Using collaborative rather than confrontational or blaming language allows people to listen to us, instead of becoming defensive or attacking. When possible, communicate face-to-face, via video or phone, *not* in writing.

**Show empathy**

Empathy is the capacity to sense other people's emotions and to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. Empathy helps to calm people because they feel heard, understood and safe. It can de-escalate strong emotions and lead to understanding and connection.

**Conclusion**

The challenges of the pandemic make it even more important for us to find ways to achieve calm and learn to make better decisions in the face of conflict. We can upskill ourselves by reading or taking specialised courses that address how we can change our mindset to perceive conflict as a potentially powerful agent for change, innovation and growth.

Organisations also have a vital role to play by taking a strategic approach to informal conflict management. This could include offering courses on *Courageous Workplace Conversations* and *Conflict Management Skills* and enabling informal conflict management processes such as mediation and conflict coaching.

Next time you're triggered, make a *conscious* decision to pause and de-activate your stress response. Once calm, you'll be able to respond in a more constructive, empathic and collaborative manner. The benefits to your emotional well-being and those around you will be significant, with the potential to strengthen your relationships, both in and out of work.