



3 Ways To Help A Colleague Struggling With Conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 31 March 2022

“My boss is a nightmare, and I’m at my wits’ end!” When experiencing a tricky workplace relationship, workers often turn to a trusted colleague for support. But how to respond? Leap to their defense, or spend time sympathizing? Back up their views, or give advice?

Although well-intentioned, misjudged support can make things worse, exacerbating conflict. There are three key principles to bear in mind when helping a colleague with a difficult situation.

Meet them where they are

When approached by a colleague, it’s a natural instinct to give advice, offer a solution, or share a similar experience. And that’s where the first challenge lies. As a colleague relates the details of their experience, the listener is often occupied in their thoughts, preparing what to say in response. In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey said, “The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply”.

And many of those replies can be counterproductive. Telling someone what to do is disempowering and removes the opportunity for them to work out their own course of action. A response, such as “Why didn’t you say ...?” can appear critical. Any guidance is based on assumptions about the best course of action for someone else. It is also only based on one perspective, without taking into account different viewpoints from the other parties involved.

A more helpful approach is to focus on connecting with where people are at. Most often, those experiencing conflict need to talk things through, which helps them process the issues and feel heard. A supportive colleague should focus on asking questions to deepen understanding and listen for the underlying themes.

Avoid reinforcing conflict

Sometimes, what is said in response can inadvertently reinforce a conflict. When a colleague is venting, it can be tempting to show support by joining in. Maybe it backs up an existing perception or could appear to mirror a similar situation in the past. Saying things like, “Oh yes, they really are so demanding,” or “That’s definitely bullying, you should make a complaint,” are not helpful. Over-sympathizing with a “poor you” is equally fraught. Although this often stems from a desire to validate or defend, it can further inflame the situation.

Downplaying can also have a detrimental effect. A co-worker may seem to be oversensitive or catastrophizing, but telling them it’s not a big deal, or that it’ll blow over, is unlikely to help them see things differently, or feel heard.

Although well-meaning, these responses are likely to perpetuate the issue and can lead to feelings of hurt, negativity, and anxiety. It also discourages people to take responsibility for their part in the conflict. A more constructive approach is to be aware that it can be easy to get stuck in a negative, damaging cycle and guard against it. Reflecting back more neutrally can help, for example, “I can hear how important that is to you,” or “That must have been difficult for you to hear.”

Recognize that being open-minded is both a challenge and a way forward

In conflict, people often feel threatened and want to protect themselves from further hurt. They do this by becoming closed off to other perspectives. This can lead to fixed ideas or only seeing limited options. The longer a conflict is unaddressed, the more entrenched parties become in their views. Research of people with direct experience of workplace mediation found that being open-minded was frequently mentioned as key to conflict resolution. Firstly, be open to the fact that there will be other perspectives. Secondly, accept that no additional support may be needed other than listening. Finally, when the time is right, gently help them be more open, for example, by asking, “What might be causing your boss to act this way?”

Being there for a colleague experiencing a difficult situation can be invaluable in helping them move forward. And it can also deliver additional benefits. Research last year found that having a confidante in middle age can help stave off dementia. Providing support helps both the giver and receiver, strengthening relationships, building trust and quite simply – it feels good to help.