

3 Tips For Managing Team Conflict

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Conflict in teams is becoming more complex. Global trends, such as increased disconnection and Gen Z entering the workforce, are changing team dynamics. Although conflict, when managed constructively, is beneficial to high-performing teams, harmful conflict will negatively affect the health and productivity of individuals and teams. With managers juggling multiple pressures, ignoring interpersonal challenges at work can be tempting. However, sweeping issues under the carpet is not the answer. For any manager seeing the warning signs, here are three tips to help navigate team conflict.

1. Start with the individuals

When a manager notices a potential conflict brewing in their team, the first step is to try to connect one-on-one with the individuals involved. This will allow the manager to check in with an employee and enable the employee to express their concerns and potential ideas for moving things forward constructively. When a manager approaches this conversation without taking sides, and by asking open questions, this will help the team member to be open, non-defensive and collaborative.

One of the key elements the manager is looking for here is whether this is a one-off, something that has blown over, or whether it might benefit from being explored further. If the situation is causing distress, or is affecting people's ability to work together, a manager could encourage those involved to talk directly with each other. It may be that teammates feel comfortable doing this themselves, or they may need support from their manager. If the manager is asked to facilitate a conversation, they need to be clear on their role in this meeting. For example, how will they maintain impartiality? Do they have the skills to facilitate the meeting on their own? If the parties are entrenched in their conflict, they may need expert HR advice or third-party conflict resolution services, such as workplace mediation.

2. Consider the team

The next step is to consider the wider team. Conflict may show up at an individual level, but these individuals are part of a wider organizational system. When conflict between two or more individuals becomes destructive, it invariably affects the wider team. It's common for team members to get drawn into a conflict; they end up taking sides, which squanders time and energy. In some instances, a more holistic approach to conflict management is to work with the entire team to better understand the challenges they face and design a joint way forward.

The ideal, however, is that a manager would proactively bring the team together to consider how to deal with future challenges before they arise. Creating a team conflict charter with the input and ideas of all team members is a useful way to ensure that the team understands and agrees on how they will communicate with each other and handle future disagreements or disputes.

3. Look to yourself

A manager plays a key role in the conflict culture of the team, as well as many other aspects of team relationship dynamics. The third tip is for the manager to look to themselves by increasing their self-awareness and identifying their preferences regarding conflict. Is their natural style to be an ostrich, DIYer or a bureaucrat? For example, a manager who ignores a long and heated series of emails might be taking the 'ostrich' approach, or one who leaps straight in to fix the issue may be a 'DIYer.' By recognizing any natural tendencies and understanding the impact of these on others in the team, the manager can choose a more effective approach.

When the warning signs of team conflict appear, a manager can proactively talk to the key individuals, consider a more comprehensive team solution, and reflect on their own conflict management approach. Rather than sweeping issues under the carpet, managers can facilitate a 'spring clean,' using conflict as an opportunity to communicate better with the team and build stronger relationships at work.