



## Ask This Simple Question To Help Resolve Workplace Conflict

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When a colleague is experiencing workplace conflict, it's natural to want to offer support. But what is the best way to do this? Too often, conversations focus on finding out facts, such as who said what, or trying to establish who's "right" or "wrong". With the pressures of busy work environments, it can also be tempting to brush issues aside, suggest a quick fix, or simply defer to HR.

Whilst these approaches are grounded in good intentions, they often miss the mark. The most constructive way to support someone in conflict is to focus on how the situation is affecting them. To do that, there's one powerful question you can ask that's at the core of mediation practice: "What's the impact of this on you?"

When you ask someone about the impact of conflict, it encourages them to put their own experiences into words; to explore their thoughts without imposing boundaries or preconceptions. Voicing their feelings helps them to pause and reflect, to start making sense of what's happening and to work out how to address it.

In workplace mediations, parties consistently emphasise the value of being heard. When you really listen to people in conflict, you demonstrate care towards them. You also open the door to empathy and connection at a time when people may be feeling isolated. Importantly, it also enables you to understand them better and tailor your support to their specific needs.

### 5 alternative ways to ask this key conflict resolution question

#### 1. *How does that make you feel?*

This enables people to express their feelings, though be aware that not everyone feels comfortable talking about their feelings on the spot.

#### 2. *How has the situation affected you?*

This encourages people to reflect on their feelings and experiences, allowing them to explore different aspects of the situation.

#### 3. *What emotions does that bring up for you?*

Naming emotions helps to simplify the complex mix of feelings people are likely to be experiencing, which makes it more manageable to express and process them.

#### 4. *How are you feeling now?*

This can differentiate between what happened at the time and where they are now, which can highlight progress or improved understanding.

*5. How do you think this might be impacting the other person?*

This question prompts a broader and more nuanced point of view. However, it can bring risks if the person you ask is not ready to consider the other person's perspective, so use it with care.

**5 'pro' tips to support your approach**

Now you've asked the question, here are some ways to make your support more impactful.

Tip 1: Listen to the words that are used when the question is answered. For example, if they say, "I think that...", they're expressing a thought, not a feeling, so you can try to rephrase the question.

Tip 2: Find language that works for the person you're trying to support. Pay attention to how they express themselves, and be ready to adapt your communication to match their comfort level.

Tip 3: Asking the question once may not be enough to truly explore the impact of a conflict, so you can dig deeper by asking the question differently or reflecting back what you've heard.

Tip 4: If your colleague is repeating one emotion, such as anger, you might want to ask them to talk more about the anger, which could reveal other emotions, such as resentment or hurt.

Tip 5: Before you speak with your colleague, review a list of feelings to familiarize yourself with the emotions that may arise.

**Resolving workplace conflict starts with a focus on impact**

Workplace mediators will tell you that when mediation parties are entrenched, arguing over facts, or digging further into their positions, it will not lead to progress. When you recognize that both sides have been affected, this can breed common ground and start to build empathy and connection. So, next time you see a coworker who is experiencing a workplace conflict or approaches you for help, instead of suggesting answers, ask this one powerful question, which could be the key to unlocking the path to conflict resolution.