



Want To Handle Workplace Conflict Better? Stop Talking

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 2 October 2026

Handling conflict well isn't only about knowing what to say. It's also about knowing when to stop talking. In a difficult conversation, leaders may feel pressure to offer solutions or defend their decisions. But in doing this, they sometimes miss important information. Recognizing when the urge to talk gets in the way of understanding can help leaders change the direction of a conversation. Here's how to do it.

4 ways leaders can stop talking and learn more in workplace conflict

1. Be open to where the conversation goes

When preparing for a difficult conversation, it can feel important to get points across, agree on facts, or suggest solutions to get back on track. But while focusing on these aims, a leader can find themselves talking too much, and listening can take a back seat.

Even when listening, this can come from a place of shoring up an existing position, rather than truly hearing what the other person is saying. This leaves little room to learn something new or consider alternative perspectives.

Conversations are unpredictable; no one can know how they will unfold. Instead of trying to control the discussion, treat it as a discovery process, and explore the situation together. This lays the ground for asking questions and clarifying understanding, and is also less likely to prompt defensiveness from the other person.

2. Be less attached to your own story

When in conflict with others, there's a natural tendency to fill gaps in understanding and create stories that fit around that narrative. For example, imagining what the other person must be thinking, or deciding the reason behind what they said or did. These stories often rest on assumptions, shaped by past work conflicts. The story that is built up, however, is just one person's version and only one of many points of view.

A conflict-competent leader consciously steps outside their own story. They ask themselves what assumptions they might have made, what other possibilities there could be, and recognize that they don't yet have the full picture. Other people may know something that will shine a new light on the situation. Approaching a conversation with curiosity is likely to create space for further information to emerge. Recent research has found that intellectual humility is reliably associated with more constructive responses to conflict.

3. Don't fill the silence

Silence in a conversation can feel uncomfortable, and it can be tempting to jump in to fill the gap. But the pause may be telling the leader something. The other person may be considering what has just been said and whether it might change their point of view. They may be weighing up whether to share something personal or something they find difficult to talk about. Also consider that people have different communication styles and may need time to reflect and process before responding.

A leader who talks less, listens more, and allows for silence creates space for deeper conversation and greater understanding. This will also communicate respect and patience to the other party, which helps to de-escalate tension. A 2026 study found that speakers who experienced high-quality listening during a disagreement reported greater well-being and optimism.

4. Resist giving all the answers

Leaders are often expected to provide solutions, and it can be easy to fall into this role from a well-intentioned desire to manage the challenge and move on. However, in a conflict situation, this is often counterproductive. The people involved are usually best placed to find the answers, because they understand the context and impact firsthand. Having little say in the way forward can lead to feelings of disempowerment, while being rushed to an imposed solution can make people feel they haven't been heard.

While there will be situations where a leader needs to give direction, in many cases they can facilitate a discussion where people can reach their own conclusions. Workplace mediators will tell you that parties are much more likely to commit to a solution if they helped to develop it. This can also support people to manage power dynamics: when someone more senior makes a suggestion, people may feel obliged to agree, even if they have reservations. Giving people a say in the outcome can help distinguish agreement from compliance.

Start seeing conflict as an opportunity to learn

One mindset connects all four behaviors: seeing conflict as an opportunity to learn, rather than merely a problem to resolve. A leader can gain insight into the situation and the people involved; they can also learn about themselves, their predispositions, and their approach to workplace conflict. Conflict can also reveal issues in the wider organization that might otherwise remain hidden.

Over time, this mindset allows leaders to develop and hone their leadership skills and build stronger working relationships. The goal isn't to have the last word, but to discover something they might otherwise have missed. Handling conflict well takes the courage to speak up and the discipline to stop talking.