12 Steps to Positive Team Conflict Resolution

Learning Guide

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Team Conflict Resolution Strategies

Conflict is a natural part of life and business, but few of us are sufficiently skilled at handling it constructively and confidently. A common team dysfunction is fear of conflict – and no wonder. At its worst, mishandled or ignored conflict can lead to strained work relationships, diminished teamwork, lower productivity and disengagement.

But conflict can also be viewed as an opportunity. Well-handled conflict offers more benefits than we might expect. Diverse points of views and differences of opinion are valuable to high-quality decision-making. When we embrace conflict and deal with it quickly, efficiently, and fairly it can lead to increased collaboration, innovation, creativity and productivity.

Successful leaders need to understand and practice effective conflict resolution strategies to get the best out of their teams.

12 Steps to Positive Team Conflict Resolution

1. Maintain a positive attitude.
Your attitude is critical to the outcome: stay positive. We have a much better chance of success if we approach the conflict as an opportunity to learn and achieve a win-win solution. Throughout the process, try to see every team member in a positive light. If you have a difficult team member, challenge yourself to list five strengths he or she brings to the team.

2. Meet on neutral ground.
Whenever possible, meet face-to-face to deal with conflict – and do it on neutral ground. Find a time and place that's acceptable and convenient to everyone and agree on the time available for the process.

3. Clearly define and agree on the issue.
Describe the current problem, ask for others' views and get agreement from all sides on the real issue. Resist the urge to blame anyone. Agree on the statement of the issue using simple and factual terms. If the issue is multi-faceted, reduce it to its component pieces and deal with one issue at a time.

4. Do your homework.
Consider any past situations or history that might affect the process and resolution and the take time to plan. We need to assess what is at stake for ourselves as well as the concerns and motivation of others. Pretend that you're in each person's position and consider what those may be. Prepare specific examples that illustrate how the conflict is damaging team effectiveness. Plan to put the issue in context by talking about people's strengths and past achievements as well – this one conflict doesn't change the regard you have for the person and their contributions. Be prepared to share specific examples of how similar conflicts have been solved in the past to build the team's belief that the conflict can be successfully resolved.

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Try honestly to see things from the other person's point of view.

–Dale Carnegie

5. Take an honest inventory of yourself and help others do the same.

Determine your level of trust in the people involved. Ask yourself and encourage others to ask: "How much do my personal biases and prejudices affect this relationship?" Be conscious of aspects of your personality that can help or hinder the process.

6. Look for shared interests.

Get your team on the same side by finding the common ground and identifying similarities. Since conflict tends to magnify perceived differences and minimize similarities, look for common goals, objectives or even complaints that illustrate that you are in this together. Focus on the future and make it clear that you'll tackle the problem as a team.

7. Deal with the facts, manage the emotions.

Set the ground rules to create a safe environment: no blaming, no attacking, no passing judgement or criticizing one another's ideas. Keep the focus on how team members' behavior impacts the team outcomes rather than focusing on personalities. This will help de-personalize the conflict, separate the issues from the people involved and reduce the risk of defensiveness.

8. Be honest – and insist that others be honest.

Be clear and candid about what's important to you and why and encourage each team member to do the same.

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Among the top leadership behaviors employees most often identified as vital to their motivation were being "truly listened to" and "having their opinion respected" by their leader.

–Dale Carnegie "Leadership Blind Spots" Research

9. Present alternatives and support compromise.

Help the group come up with options that demonstrate willingness to compromise. Encourage team members to concede on items that aren't particularly important to them but that have a higher importance to others on the team. Suggest workable solutions and ask team members for their opinions or alternatives. Help them evaluate options by highlighting what's in each person's interest as well as how the team as a whole will benefit. Show your own willingness to be flexible in achieving your organization's goals and, where appropriate, offer resources and additional support.

10. Use and model your best communication skills.

You need expert communication skills to help your team solve conflict. Use "I" and "we" rather than "you" to reduce the potential for defensiveness. Ask questions, listen, rephrase what you've heard to check for understanding and take a genuine interest in what each person says. Focus less on your position and more on ways in which the team can move toward a win-win compromise.

11. End on a good note.

Together, identify the best win-win proposal and make sure that everyone involved leaves the situation feeling like they have been heard and respected. Shake hands and agree on the action steps, who is responsible, and by when. Clearly outline how and when success will be measured. If there is deadlock on non-critical issues, agree to disagree amiably. Making sure the process ends on a positive note will help encourage the team to discuss other potential challenges before they become conflict and work together to proactively develop solutions.

12. Enjoy the process.

Research shows that after overcoming conflict and reaching an agreement, people's relationships can grow even stronger. Consider the benefits of learning other people's point of view. Reflect on and learn from each conflict-solving experience – it's a critical skill to have as a leader.

Increase innovation and productivity by equipping the leaders on your with the tools to understand, manage and resolve conflict in our Leadership Training for Managers program. To learn more about Dale Carnegie's training programs on conflict resolution and other important leadership skills, please go to:

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Ask questions instead of giving direct orders.

– Dale Carnegie