

Conflict Resolution at Work For Dummies

Cheat Sheet

From **Conflict Resolution at Work For Dummies** by Vivian Scott

Conflict at work can be physically and emotionally exhausting, regardless of how directly you're involved. Discover how to mediate a conflict in your workplace by following a set process and asking the right questions. And be prepared to use internal and external resources to help you resolve the conflict.

Asking Questions to Help Resolve a Workplace Conflict

When you're dealing with a conflict between yourself and a co-worker (your boss, a peer, or a subordinate), your focus is on resolving the conflict and improving the situation. Invite the other person to sit down with you, and ask these questions:

- **What would you like to see happen? What does that look like for you?** Ask these questions one right after another so your colleague can describe what he *does* want versus what he doesn't want. He may ask for respect, but until he describes what respectful behavior looks like to him, you won't know how to deliver on his request. Changing your behavior to match your definition of respect may not be what he's looking for.
- **What would it take for us to be able to move forward? How do we get there?** These questions help an employee describe specific steps that may include an apology or a better understanding of his perspective before he can get over it.
- **Are you willing to share the impact this has had on you? Are you willing to hear my perspective?** Asking about a conflict's impact moves the discussion from surface details to a working relationship level. Your colleague will appreciate your interest in him and may be more open to hearing your perspective as well. The goal is for both of you to understand the effects of actions, assumptions, and language choices.

- **What ideas do you have that would meet both our needs?** The key part of this question is “both our needs.” It puts the onus for solution on both of you and shows that you’re interested in creating a remedy that isn’t just about you.
- **Can you tell me more about that?** This question helps you avoid the “why” questions, which can lead to defensiveness. Show a curiosity to hear more so an employee can share his perspective without feeling like he’s on trial or your boss doesn’t misinterpret a “why” question as disrespect.
- **What about this situation is most troubling to you? What’s most important to you?** Either way you ask it, this question helps you pinpoint what the real issues are (and they’re almost always based on a core value being dismissed, disregarded, or trampled on).

Conflict Resolution Resources for the Workplace

Resolving conflict at work starts with the employees, but some situations call for additional resources. If you find yourself in a situation that needs a little extra help, look to your organization’s internal experts or consider hiring an outside professional for conflict resolution.

- **Internal expertise:**
 - **Human Resources:** Partner with HR to ferret out the resources your organization currently has in place and what the company may be willing to find or create for you.
 - **Ombudsman:** Turning to an ombudsman is a confidential way for all employees (including you!) to talk through existing problems and consider alternatives.
 - **Shared neutrals:** A panel of peers is a low-cost way to review, discuss, and mediate disputes.

- **External expertise:**

- **Conflict coaches:** Coaching employees through an existing conflict can also help them build skills to handle future difficulties.
- **Dispute Resolution Centers:** A community resource can be a cost-effective way to harness conflict resolution expertise.
- **Mediators:** A trained professional can effectively decipher issues and provide neutrality when you need it most.
- **Training organizations:** Proactively training employees to address the inevitable workplace conflict saves time and money.

Mediation Process for Resolving Conflict at Work

If you're a manager dealing with a conflict in the workplace (and what workplace doesn't have some conflict?), you need a strategy to approach and defuse the disagreement. You can effectively mediate the conflict by following this process:

1. Do preliminary planning, scheduling, and room setup.

Getting the right people in the right room at the right time is a good first step to creative problem-solving. Do some leg work upfront to determine who's involved in a conflict. Then put some effort into creating an inviting environment so your employees have the best shot at successfully resolving their issue.

2. Greet parties and discuss the process.

Setting ground rules, discussing your role as a neutral facilitator (which may be new to your employees) and letting the parties know that you're open to helping them resolve their differences are all ways to demonstrate that this conflict — and its resolution — belongs to them.

3. Share perspectives.

Refining the art of reflecting and reframing helps you identify core values, neutralize emotional language, and demonstrate that listening to each other's point of view is far more productive than listening to rebuttals.

4. Build an agenda together.

Creating a cooperative agenda *after* hearing each other's perspective lets employees build a list of topics that acts as a compass for the rest of their meeting and provides a yardstick for their progress.

5. Negotiate in good faith.

Giving employees the space to brainstorm and make proposals for solutions that benefit both of them can create remedies that are longer lasting and more durable.

6. Hold private meetings if necessary.

Meeting privately gives each employee an opportunity to share sensitive information, practice how he might ask for what he needs, apologize for his role in the conflict, or acknowledge the positive aspects of his working relationship.

7. Craft agreements, with details.

The best agreements are detailed agreements. Leaving anything to the imagination can cause trouble down the road, so crafting agreements with an eye for detail gives employees the boundaries and certainty they seek.

8. Monitor follow-through.

Looking for signs that things are going well or tuning into cues that there's more work to be done gives you an opportunity to praise your employees for what they're doing well and to coach them on next steps.

Signs That Conflict at Work Is Subsiding

When you're attempting to resolve conflict in the workplace, you want to see signs that the situation is starting to improve. Your mediation strategies are working when you begin to notice that your employees

- Have relaxed conversations and interactions
- Cooperate on tasks and projects
- Change their word choices (for example, "them" becomes "us")
- Reduce their gossip
- Improve their tone of voice and relax their body language
- Keep their agreements
- Display a willingness to address new problems

Common Contributors to Conflict at Work

When you're dealing with conflict in the workplace, consider the underlying causes. Conflict is rarely as simple as it seems on the surface. Problems at work are often caused — or exacerbated — by the following:

- **Ambiguous roles and responsibilities:** Being vague with an employee about his job and the tasks associated with his duties creates a situation in which he's left to decode your expectations. Create clear directives that include who, what, when, where, and why so he doesn't trip over his co-workers just trying to get his job done.
- **Assumptions and expectations:** Ask open-ended questions to see whether an employee is filling in details based on his past experiences (both on the job and in his personal life) or whether he's seeing something you're not.
- **Core values not being met:** Rarely is a disagreement about surface issues. Determine what's most important to an employee by uncovering his values. Use the insight to help him create long-lasting solutions based on what will satisfy all parties involved.
- **Differing personal lenses and filters through which co-workers interpret the world:** Recognize that all members of your staff have individual lenses and filters through which they see and respond to their environments — and no two are the same. Deciphering the code and seeing things from their perspectives give you a new way to understand and approach problems.
- **Emotions hijacking conversations:** When emotions are high, reasoning is low. Let things calm down, and then approach employees to discover what caused the reaction in the first place.
- **Group dynamics such as gossip and cliques:** Cliques form in the workplace for a number of reasons, but whatever the motivation employees have for attaching themselves to co-workers, the attachment has both positive and negative repercussions. Use positive group momentum to your advantage and equalize the power when needed.
- **Miscommunication or vague language:** Say what you mean and mean what you say. Avoid using language like "when you get to it" and "whatever you think." Leaving things to an employee's imagination can make for some pretty imaginative interpretations.