

# Conflict at Work... an advantage

An important ingredient for business success is to hire smart, confident, and assertive people. However, when you do, you're sure to have conflict. It's impossible to put a bunch of intelligent, self-assured people together without them bumping heads.

In fact, if there isn't conflict, then something may be very wrong. Nothing creative ever happens in boring, placid environments. The trick is to help all those smart people navigate conflict effectively and positively.

## What causes conflict?

No two human beings – not even identical twins – are alike in every aspect. Our individual uniqueness, and inherent differences, mean that in relationships we bring different:

- Wants and needs
- Values and beliefs
- Assumptions and interpretations
- Degrees of knowledge and information
- Expectations and cultural norms

When smart people interact, they will have inevitable differences in opinions but that does not need to become destructive. One of the main reasons people end up in conflict is that differences in ideas are taken too personally.

It then becomes exceedingly difficult to discuss and evaluate the ideas or "opinions" objectively because we end up defending our "selves" rather than debating the merit of the ideas. You know someone is taking it too personally if it feels like they are fighting for their life.

## Clashing styles

Another reason for conflict is that people think and communicate differently – they have stylistic clashes. For example, we all know people who are analytical thinkers, who think in a linear fashion. Then there are more intuitive people, who develop ideas that simply don't appear to make logical sense.

Entrepreneurs, for example, tend to be more intuitive. This can be a plus when working to capture the emotional interest of investors. However, the same entrepreneur will have to share a logical business case to successfully raise funds.

Unfortunately, we often miss the benefits in this range of thinking styles, dismissing other's thinking style in pejorative terms. Analytical people may call intuitive thinkers "flakey," while being thought of as "dense" by spontaneous thinkers.

## Dealing with conflict

Most people handle conflict in one of four ways:

1. Victim. They do and say nothing directly, act powerless and then complain to others.
2. Avoidance. They keep away from the conflict.

3. Change. They change their own opinion either because they found sufficient reasons to do so or simply to avoid continued confrontation.
4. Assertively confront. They address the issue openly, candidly, and objectively by communicating with the other party.

Confronting conflict head-on is one of the hardest things for people to do.

*“Most people believe that conflict is caused by difficult, quarrelsome people who simply can’t or won’t change; that successful teamwork requires a conflict-free environment; that people can’t separate disagreements over business issues from personal attacks; and that confronting another person or group always leaves bad feelings.”* -Howard Guttman, from “When Goliaths Clash,”

So, with this backdrop, most people avoid confronting assertively. They feel there is no point, and it will be fruitless.

## Strategies for senior teams

To address conflict management, Howard Guttman identifies four distinct areas where senior teams must be aligned:

- Strategic and operational goals must be clear, specific and agreed-upon.
- Team members’ roles must be carefully defined so each member knows exactly what he or she is responsible for and what he or she is authorized to do.
- Ground rules must be established to guide group behavior.
- The broad range of personal styles that team members use when interacting with one another must be understood and managed.

### 1. Strategic and operational goals

If there is no clear goal ahead, people will tend to wander where they please. This is why strategic plans are needed, even if you have to adjust them as market demands change. By clarifying where the company is headed and being clear about the main business goals, you’ll reduce the tendency for quarrelling over direction. People can then focus on their role in achieving the key objectives.

### 2. Team members’ roles

Ask your team:

How clear are you about your role and accountability on the team?

- How clear are you about your role and accountability in the organization?

Teams in destructive conflict will often be unable to answer those questions well. Discuss what is expected from one another. Helping people understand each other’s roles and clarifying who has decision making authority helps reduce conflict. It also allows people to say with authority, “This is my call.”

### 3. Ground rules

You need clear behavioral ground rules, both within and without your team. These will be your procedures for resolving conflicts.

Some examples are:

- Resolve internally...

It can be tempting to bring in a third-party referee (triangulation), but this removes responsibility from the parties to resolve the matter themselves. Try to coach from the sidelines and only get involved directly if they simply cannot work it out themselves.

- Keep disagreements private...

Some people try to win others over to their side, rather than working to resolve the issue. This makes private disagreements public and ups the stakes.

- Time limit...

Employ a time limit. If the combatants cannot resolve the issue by the deadline, they must drop the issue and move on. This can reduce the chance that the issue festers and grows, spreading negativity throughout the team and often down through the organization.

- Everyone present...

At a team meeting, if someone raises an issue that involves an absent team member, the discussion should stop immediately. The team owes it to the missing team member to postpone further debate until he or she can be present.

## 4. Personal styles

Developing the capability to understand and respond to differing personality styles is particularly important but easily mangled. You may have participated in personality typing trainings such as the DISC or Myers Briggs (MBTI).

Those tools are helpful mostly because they highlight the fact that people are different. You should adjust your communication and management styles to accommodate those differences.

However, do not fall into the trap of pigeonholing each other based on categories. This will just blinker you and limit your colleagues.

## Summary

As a psychologist, I am constantly surprised as to how hard it really is to understand others, but also how these differences bring pleasantly surprises.

I've been most successful at working with others when I've followed Mark Twain's aphorism, "The smartest man I've ever known is my tailor. He measures me anew each time he meets me."

Do your best to really get to know your colleagues so that you can understand their unique talents, needs, and desires. Then look for ways to align those three ingredients with yours and those of the organization.

If you can understand the other person's agenda, you'll be better able to navigate the inevitable conflicts that arise by finding mutually beneficial and acceptable solutions.