

## Meaningful Conflict in the Workplace

### *Introduction*

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines conflict as “competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons).” Which of us would actively seek to participate in this type of behavior? People shy away from conflict, because it is unpleasant and uncomfortable. People also tend to feel defensive when conflict arises.

In fact, conflict avoidance can be more harmful than beneficial. In actuality, conflict is not only inevitable, but it is also a necessary component for problem-solving and for creating healthy work relationships.

In this reading, we will explore the benefits of *healthy* conflict, the causes of workplace conflicts, and how to have meaningful conflict for positive outcomes.

### *Conflict Myths and Why People Think Conflict Is Bad*

As stated above, people sometimes view conflict as a negative action. However, properly addressed conflict can provide positive results. Here are some myths that explain why people view conflict as a negative. This section will set the groundwork for our discussion about how conflict can actually be beneficial in the workplace.

#### Myth #1

“I must win the argument.” This assumes that every argument is a win/lose situation, and we always want to be the winner.

#### Myth #2

“If you do not agree with me, then you are against me.” Once we take this attitude, then we begin to believe that people will be against us on every issue.

#### Myth #3

“I must avoid you, because we have had conflicts in the past.” We assume that if we had a conflict in the past with someone, any attempt at talking to that person will be unwelcome.

#### Myth #4

“Problems will go away on their own.” It is easy for us to avoid something we disagree with and assume that the problem will resolve itself.

## Myth #5

“Other people know what I am thinking, and I know what other people think.” We assume that even when we do not communicate orally that everyone knows what other people mean or what they are saying. Also, if we do not understand something, then we may assume everyone else does, so we do not say anything for fear of appearing stupid.

Conflict can inspire creativity and encourage individual thinking. By facilitating meaningful conflict, companies can experience idea-generation and improved processes. However, given the negative views that people have about conflict, let's discuss why conflict occurs, why it is important, and ways in which to address conflict for positive outcomes.

### *The Causes of Conflict*

In any workplace, there are problems that arise every day. Recognizing and understanding the source of the conflict is the first step in addressing the issue. Once the source of the conflict is identified, conflict can more readily be addressed. We will now discuss several common areas of conflict.

### Ineffective Communication

Poor communication between managers and employees, as well as between employees, can be damaging. A clear understanding of what decisions need to be made, who is responsible for making those decisions, and an understanding of everyone's role in a situation will help mitigate this very common area of conflict. In teams, poor communication may lead to uncertainty and stress among team members. For example, if one team member does not receive an expected piece of information from another team member in order to complete a task, then the first member may be concerned about finishing the project on time. This may result in conflict between the two team members.

### Hierarchical and Resource Ambiguity

Very often, workers will not be clear on their area of responsibility. Additionally, they may be unaware of the responsibilities of others. Furthermore, part of this source of conflict is not having enough individuals for all of the required tasks, which may cause anxiety for workers and may result in arguments and disagreements among employees. For example, in many workplaces where downsizing has occurred, individual employees may find that they are expected to fill the gap for the jobs that are no longer occupied. This creates work overload, unclear expectations, and individual and group stress.

## Personality Conflicts

Very often, people who work together might not have good chemistry to facilitate productivity. We may have different values, come from different backgrounds, or see things in others that we do not like in ourselves. For example, one worker may have a very direct style of communication, whereas a co-worker may be more reserved. If these two workers are required to work on a team, their differing styles may hinder the productivity of the group.

## Poor Leadership

Leaders who micro-manage or who do not give sufficient direction will surely cause conflict in the workplace. A leader who is not decisive will leave his or her team without focus. Finally, a leader who does not understand the jobs of those who work for him or her is destined to create problems among employees and throughout the enterprise. For example, if a leader has not developed specific criteria by which to measure the success of his or her employees, then ambiguity will exist. Employees will not know what they need to do to advance, be promoted, or be eligible for raises.

By identifying these areas of conflict, we can seek ways to improve communication, solve these problems for greater productivity, and develop positive work environments.

## *The Importance of Conflict*

While we have identified several negative results of conflict, conflict can have many positive applications in the workplace. Important conflict in the workplace does not include arguing about seating arrangements in the conference room, or who has the nicer office. Healthy conflict in the workplace should encompass *meaningful conflict*.

Meaningful conflict is important for problem-solving and for developing positive workplace relationships. Conflict helps to identify problems and foster creative solutions; conflict enables issues to be prioritized; conflict brings out peoples' ingenuity; and enables people to become aware of the contributions that can come about as a result of individuals' differences. Meaningful conflict can also help to identify potential future leaders—people who are willing to state their case and provide support for their position and people who are willing to demonstrate leadership skills and the ability to get their messages across in clear and persuasive ways. When people engage in meaningful conflict, they are also engaging in the exchange of ideas. If everyone agreed with each other all the time, there would be no innovation, no progress, and no fresh methods of doing things.

Companies should encourage their employees to have exchanges of meaningful conflict. We will discuss ways in which organizations can facilitate meaningful conflict in the next section. Having such exchanges indicates the willingness to be open to new ideas; this allows workers to be creative and to explore new ways of thinking.

Engaging in meaningful conflict elevates an organization's professionalism. Participating in discussions where there are many varying opinions and then coming out of those discussions with a solution that all can agree with shows maturity, professionalism, and a feeling of reaching common goals as a group.

### *Encouraging Meaningful Conflict*

Now that we have established the importance of workplace conflict, here are seven tips for organizations to encourage employees to participate in conflict in constructive and productive ways.

1. *Management sets the tone.* Managers must create an environment that will allow meaningful discussion, the sharing of ideas, and one that is built on mutual respect. Managers' behaviors and actions provide employees with a model to follow.
2. *Hire the right people.* Management should seek out those potential employees who demonstrate the ability to address conflict in positive and productive ways.
3. *Train your employees.* Many employees may not know how to engage in positive conflict. Providing education and training will enable them to develop effective skills.
4. *Reward meaningful conflict.* Recognize employees who participate in positive conflict, and reward those whose actions result in successful outcomes for the company.
5. *Encourage your employees to support their position.* People should be expected to be able to support their positions with facts and figures. This will take the conflict from emotional to rational.
6. *Encourage your employees to be respectful.* Participants in meaningful conflict situations must be respectful of others and be forbidden from making personal attacks on others.
7. *Encourage honesty.* All participants must feel free to express their opinions with all viewpoints considered to be equal.

### *Conclusion*

Conflict is a natural process in any business environment. Meaningful conflict can be a useful tool for problem-solving, generating new ideas, and for increasing productivity. Leaders and managers should encourage workers to participate in meaningful conflict on a regular basis to solve problems. This will enable workers

to share their ideas, discuss problems, and engage in teamwork in healthy and constructive ways.

*Summary:*

- People tend to avoid conflict, because it is uncomfortable and unpleasant.
- Myths surrounding conflict, such as the ones that follow, indicate that people have a negative and inaccurate view about conflict:
  1. “I must win the argument.”
  2. “If you don’t agree with me, then you are against me.”
  3. “I must avoid you, because we have had conflicts in the past.”
  4. “Problems will go away on their own.”
  5. “Other people know what I am thinking, and I know what other people think.”
- Common areas of conflict include poor communication, hierarchical and resource ambiguity, personality conflicts, and poor leadership.
- Meaningful conflict is an essential component for problem-solving and for developing positive workplace relationships.
- Meaningful conflict results in the identification of problems and solutions.
- Meaningful conflict helps workers to prioritize issues.
- Meaningful conflict enables workers to explore their creativity.
- Meaningful conflict illustrates the contributions of others.
- Organizations should encourage their employees to participate in meaningful conflict, taking the following tips into consideration:
  1. Management sets the tone for meaningful discussion.
  2. Managers should hire employees who show the ability to participate in constructive conflict.
  3. Managers should train employees in positive conflict skills.
  4. Managers should reward meaningful conflict results.
  5. Managers should encourage employees to support their positions with accurate information.
  6. Managers should encourage employees’ respect for one another.
  7. Managers should encourage honesty and equality in all discussions.

