

# Working Solutions

## Ideas for Resolving Conflict

**The word “conflict” can bring many different ideas and thoughts to mind.** We often think of hostility, aggression, withdrawal, power struggles, and opposition. Just the mention of the word can make us uneasy. Most people can probably recall a time that they experienced a conflict with a friend, teacher, parent, or family member. Sometimes the results were satisfying, at other times disaster resulted.

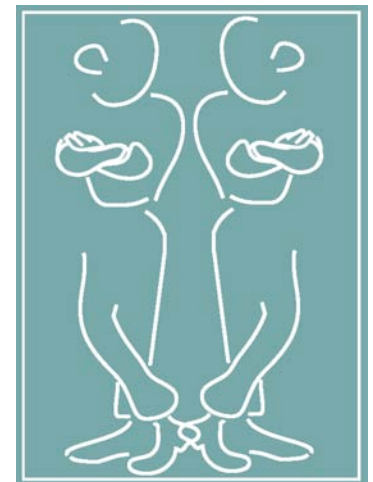
Conflict seems to be something we should avoid. We fear confrontation in conflict and we associate it with anger and see it as destructive. But conflict is normal and happens continually. Conflict can even be a constructive and positive experience for all parties involved. It's usually our reaction to, and method of dealing with conflict, rather than the conflict itself, that causes painful, frightening, or even damaging experiences.

### Characteristics of Conflict

Conflict issues can be big or small between individuals or among groups. It can be as simple as a volunteer trying to get a coordinator to decide on a project, or as complex as a violation of the law. Whether large or small, conflict has certain characteristics:

- There must be at least two parties.
- There must be some kind of struggle or threat either real or suspected. Conflict doesn't exist until both parties are aware there is a problem.
- There must be some interaction or interference. A conflict arises when we feel that someone is interfering in our business.
- The transaction may be emotional.

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*“While conflict may seem negative, it is a natural event in relationships between people... It occurs because people care about each other, personal goals, individual priorities, and themselves.”*

## Techniques to Resolving Conflict

We can become more effective in conflict resolution if we respond by consciously selecting behavior, instead of merely reacting based on our first impression of a situation. To prepare us, we need to develop the skills and learn techniques to effectively deal with conflict situations.

1. **Talk directly to the parties involved.**  
Assuming there is no threat of physical violence, a one-on-one or private setting is best. Be certain that no one is being misquoted or misinterpreted by using reflective listening, simply repeating back to the speaker what you think he or she is trying to say. *Direct conversation is much more effective than complaining to everyone else.*
2. **Choose a good time.** Plan to talk to the other person at the right time and allow enough time for a thorough discussion. Don't start talking about the conflict just as the other person is leaving for work, after you have had a terrible day, or right before you have something important to do. Try to talk in a quiet private place where everyone can be comfortable and undisturbed for as long as the discussion takes.
3. **Plan ahead.** Consider what you want to say ahead of time. State clearly what the problem is and how it affects those involved.
4. **Don't blame or name call.** Antagonizing the other party only makes it harder for them to understand you. Don't blame the other person for everything or begin the conversation with your opinion of what should be done.
5. **Give factual information.** Don't interpret the other party's behavior. Instead give information about your own thoughts and feelings. Use "I" statements such as "I felt disappointed when..." or "I witnessed..."
6. **Listen.** Give the other party a chance to tell his or her side of the conflict completely.

Use reflective listening, try to learn how the other party feels. Although you may not agree with what is being said, tell the other person that you hear him or her and are glad that you are discussing the problem together.

7. **Talk it through.** Get all of the issues and feelings out in the open. Don't leave out the part that seems too "difficult" to discuss or too insignificant to be important. The solution will work best if all issues are discussed thoroughly.
8. **Brainstorm for solutions.** Consider a variety of ideas to help solve the problem. Don't judge the ideas as right or wrong, or good or bad. Look for options that emphasize the common good. Two or more people cooperating produce lasting solutions more effectively than one person telling another to change.
9. **Look for win-win solutions.** Try to settle differences in a manner which achieves everyone's need for security, being needed, validation, and respect. Compare and evaluate the different options to find something that can please all parties. See if there are one or more options that are agreeable to both parties. Focus on what is needed and not what is desired. Strive to develop a compromise to reach this goal.
10. **Follow through.** Agree to check with each other at specific times to make sure the agreement is still working—then do it.

### Summary

While conflict may seem negative, it is a natural event in relationships between people. We simply cannot avoid it. It occurs because people care about each other, personal goals, individual priorities, and themselves. Depending on how we choose to resolve conflicts, they may have negative or positive consequences. In itself, conflict is neither good nor bad. It's what we do with it that makes the difference. ■ **Source: Rinehart, S.H. (1999). Managing Conflict Creatively.** Retrieved 2-21-2005 from Ohio State University Extension Web site. Article has been edited for this publication.

## Avoid Cubicle Crisis

Although the stress of working in an office cubicle has been the substance of Dilbert™ comic strips and much office lore, it can be less stressful if you make your space efficient and personal. Best ideas: (1) Use a large, clear plastic desk pad with frequently needed information handily slipped underneath it. You'll manage information more effectively, which is key to reducing cubicle stress. (2) Add a small bulletin board for those small pieces of paper you need, but frequently shuffle around on your desk. (3) Add greenery (small plants), trophies, certificates, or cartoons. (4) Add or frequently rotate photos of family, friends, and your last vacation. (5) Manage information by making it available at your fingertips. (6) Get rid of the dust!

## Make “Happy” a Habit

Add “participate in an activity that makes me happy” to your to-do list of managing stress, exercising, eating well, and getting enough sleep. Research from the University College London says happiness leads to a healthier heart. Levels of cortisol—a stress hormone—were 32 percent lower in people who reported having more happy moments during the day, and a chemical marker for artery damage (fibrinogen) was also lower. The study accounted for other factors that could have explained the phenomenon. ■ Source: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) (News/April 19).

## Practice Safety with Peers

Establishing a culture of safety in your work unit or organization does not happen simply by hanging safety posters and trying to remember to “think safety.” Everyone must pitch in. Try this strategy: add peer reinforcement to improve safe workplace practices. Spend a few minutes in staff or team meetings giving feedback to your peers on how well they practice safety, discussing unsafe work conditions needing attention, and pointing out unsafe work practices when you see them among peers. The peer influence that results may prevent an injury or save a life, and remembering to practice safety may have more staying power. ■

## Cross-Cultural Cohesiveness

Learning how to communicate effectively across cultures is becoming crucial to success in business. The coworker in the next cubicle may see the world differently from the way you do. So, how will you increase your understanding of others' views (and vice versa) and avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings that can inhibit efficiency and productivity? Here are a few keys to cross-cultural cohesiveness:



**Understand the mechanics.** All of us have “filters”—values, life experiences, traditions, and beliefs that play key roles in how we interpret experiences and events and that influence our perceptions. How people perceive matters can differ greatly among other cultures.

**Look out for cross-cultural differences.** Although it is helpful to understand another person's perspective and world view, you may not have the luxury of discovering it or having it explained prior to a misunderstanding. Knowing that cultural views may differ can instill more patience, a healthy sense of curiosity, and a willingness to learn from a coworker rather than invest in conflict.

**People are the same, it's the rules that differ.** We want to understand and be understood. Rules differ among cultures about how to talk to and act toward others—whether to look someone in the eye while speaking, express feelings openly, or show emotions to those we don't know. Be slow to be offended by difference, and quick to consider whether a cultural rule is in play. People from different cultures work better together when they share rules of communication, but it may take some time before new rules are adopted. ■

## High Time for Drug Use

With summer comes a higher likelihood that teens and preteens will first experiment with illegal drugs—more so than at any other time during the year, according to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Key contributing factors are less adult supervision and lack of structured time. The recommendation is to keep children involved in summer activities, know where they are, and know who they are with. Make drug use unacceptable and say it won't be tolerated. The average age of first use of cigarettes is 12.8, marijuana 13.9, and alcohol 14.6. The peak months of first experimentation are June and July. (Exception: First-time use of alcohol is more likely in December and January, but only slightly.)

■ Source: SAMHSA-Seasonality of Youth's First-Time Use of Marijuana, Cigarettes, or Alcohol, 2004.

## When Personal Meets Performance

**Q.** I was referred to the EAP because of a legal problem off the job that came to the attention of my employer. Is this appropriate?

**A.** Remember, a supervisor referral to the EAP is designed to be helpful. A personal experience outside work that reflects upon the employer, your job, your qualifications, or the job's essential functions may make a supervisor referral to the EAP appropriate, and possibly help prevent a recurrence. ■

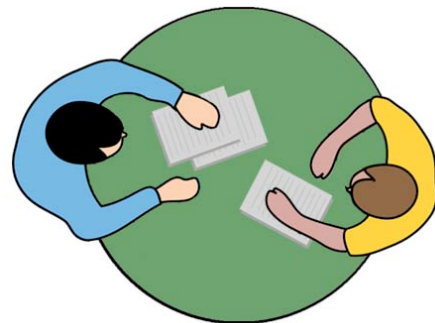
## Taking Apprehension Out of Appraisals

Reduce the anxiety of performance appraisals by taking these steps:

1. **Review the goals and standards** of your position, and the expectations and outcomes since your last performance appraisal. Know what you will say about each one.
2. **Be able to discuss** what you do well in your job. Share insights about improvements that you would like to make. No one is perfect, so identifying these personal work goals shows you are invested in your job and your personal growth.
3. **Suggest** what you would like to work on in the coming year that adds value to the work unit.

### Smart Moves for Next Year

Keep notes of your ideas during the year so you don't forget them, then discuss those ideas during your review. Periodically discuss your job performance with your boss. Don't wait for her or him to approach you first. ■



*Your EAP is designed to help you deal with life stresses and a variety of personal challenges. For confidential services offered at no cost to all employees and their families, please call:*



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**TDD (800) 448-1823**  
**Teen Line (800) 334-8336 (TEEN)**  
**E-mail: [eap@alliancewp.com](mailto:eap@alliancewp.com)**  
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