



Conflict at Work

Do you ever come home steaming about an interaction you had that day in your place of work? Are there people at your job you avoid or wish you could avoid? Do these relationships sour your job satisfaction? If so, you are not alone.

A study in the mid 90's reported that 84% of companies surveyed were experiencing increased hostility from employees. A recent Gallup survey reported 30% of employees experienced high stress due to interactions with others on the job. The Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters association reported that 60% of companies surveyed cited communications and teamwork issues as the highest-ranking problems.

'No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...'
John Donne, 1624.

Almost 400 years after John Donne wrote these famous words, it should be no surprise that our relationships at home and work are central to our satisfaction. Yet many of our workplaces still function as if emotion is somehow counterproductive, and emotional responses to colleagues and supervisors are a sign of weakness. How do we reconcile our universal human needs for respect and connection with the inevitable tensions that arise from close contact with others at work? If you have experienced conflicts with coworkers, you know that too often there is no resolution and tension festers. The resolution of work place conflicts are difficult for some of the same reasons problems develop in the first place; we are all individuals trying to fit in work environments that are increasingly stressful, demanding and competitive.

But what can you do about it? Of course, there are no simple answers, but there are some things that you can try. Don't be dismayed if they seem simplistic – consider the list a reminder of things you have probably thought of before and as just a place to start. What have you got to lose? You may as well entertain yourself by reading the list instead of obsessing about what that jerk at work did to you today, anyway.

1. **Know yourself:** Identify the situations that get to you. What gets you upset at work? Is it the way someone treats you, or that you just don't like him or her? Do impossible demands or a broken system frustrate you? Or do you get mad when something was not said that should have been, e.g.. "he should have thanked me for my work." Are there ways you can defuse the reactions when you become aware they are disproportionate to the present situation? No need to overdo it and increase your stress. Set aside a fixed amount of time to listen and pinpoint the thoughts that circle your head while you drive home muttering.
2. **Presume good intentions:** You might work with people who long ago proved they are not trustworthy. Most people, though, most of the time, have a reason for speaking or acting that you might not understand. In fact, we all almost automatic assume we know what

another person is thinking. After all, we know what those same words mean if we say them. Once you've become aware of what irks you, you can ask a few questions to check your assumptions before you respond. For example, you can ask your colleague, "What did you really mean?"

3. **Look ahead:** We have all walked away from a conversation regretting something we said out of embarrassment, anger, or defensiveness. When we are aware of feelings as they occur, we are more likely to effectively respond. To build this awareness, look ahead and prepare yourself for situations. Is there anything you pinpointed in reflecting about "Knowing yourself" that will help you avoid the situation next time?

We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it - and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove-lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove-lid again - and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore. --Mark Twain

4. **Direct Communication:** In the workplace, simple and direct communication is appreciated. This means that emotional undertones (and overtones) are often counterproductive in many workplace cultures. In one study of accounting firms, only 6% of grievances were expressed. In your workplace culture, would an emotional response be viewed as a weakness and unprofessional, or as an ordinary communication? Are some emotions more acceptable than others? The challenge in all work places is to find a direct expression of your thoughts and feelings that you can express within the style of your work environment. This problem is akin to an art class assignment to draw with only charcoal, or a potluck that is restricted to black and white foods. What is YOUR expression within the rules of your work culture? A moment of reflection can help you frame what you want to say in an appropriate way.
5. **Be Specific:** Your comments are more likely to be well received if they are concretely referenced to a situation. For example, "I believe you were trying to clarify things when you interrupted me at the meeting today, but it diminished my authority with the staff." Similarly, be specific in asking for a response (e.g. "Next time, please wait until I'm finished speaking and then you can add information").

Character consists of keeping out of the way of fools...not in conquering them. – Moses Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed (1135-1204)

6. **Stop Talking:** Knowing when to stop communicating is as important as communicating. With a friend you can be more persistent in resolving conflicts. At work, if talking doesn't help, you might consider changing your approach or giving it up. How many times have you lobbied for a particular change? Is the person with whom you are dealing capable of understanding you or changing in the way you want?
7. **Translate:** We already talked about how the same expression can have different meaning for different people and the risk of making assumptions. We mistranslate the language and styles of our coworkers in other ways, too. For example, one extrovert I know says, "How

can I know what I'm thinking unless I say it out loud?" Not knowing that, an introvert listening might presume a deeper conviction is intended.

Similarly, imagine an argument between two people, one of whom makes decisions by what feels right, the other by what can be rationally justified. The argument can remain unresolved for a long time until at least one of the parties considers how they are arguing.

Mistranslating non-verbal communication also leads to conflicts. Do you and your coworkers understand each other's non-verbal communication? Particularly preceding, during and following a conflict, do you notice yourself responding to facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture that you assume mean specific things?

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

--George Bernard Shaw

8. **Beware of being the malcontent:** Shaw may be right, but without moderation the "unreasonable" man or woman will not get the raises and promotions. Without moderation the revolutionary will become a burr under the saddle and will quickly lose authority, become ineffective and be dismissed with a waive of the hand, no matter how truly he or she speaks. Mother Teresa said, "Patience attains all it strives for." How can you pace your suggestions so that they will just lead but not frustrate the organization or individual? What must you do inside yourself to restrain the vehemence and frequency of your suggestions and observations so that they remain effective and you remain credible? If you cannot, what does that mean for your own satisfaction where you are? Can you acknowledge other opinions and their bases without compromising your integrity? There may also be ways to open a conversation positively rather than respond negatively. For example, if you are asked to perform a task that you don't believe you have the resources to accomplish, are there resources you could request that would make it possible? (e.g. "I'd be happy to take that task. In order to complete it and my other assignments on time, am I authorized to use support staff to help?")
9. **Know the workplace culture:** Each workplace is unique and different from other more personal or social settings. In hierarchical workplaces, some responses are more advisable than others. In some, you do not want to make enemies with people in positions of authority, especially if you want to keep your job. What are the characteristics of your workplace culture and how do they affect your responses to conflict? Is the environment collaborative or authoritarian? Is communication formal, i.e., appointments for meetings, written communication, etc.? Does the culture value team work or individual accomplishments?

The learning and knowledge that we have, is, at the most, but little compared with that of which we are ignorant. --Plato

10. **Get a second opinion.** Sometimes when we lose perspective, it's best to check it out with an impartial person inside or outside the company. If you do consult with someone, recognize that he or she may not know the non-verbal signals you missed, or the context. It is your side of the story your friend/colleague/counselor is hearing, so you will best serve yourself by imagining and presenting the other side of the argument. What would your antagonist say if he or she were present?

11. **Management problems:** There are some issues only upper management can resolve. Conflicts can fester for years only to be quickly and easily resolved by a new manager. If the cause of conflicts is a manager who consistently undermines you, your staff or your work, resolution may be beyond your control. If your supervisor does not clearly define tasks and goals so that you can complete them, your morale and productivity inevitably suffers.

Another common problem is one or more malcontents poisoning the atmosphere for a larger group. It is up to a good manager to quickly decide the nature of the conflict, restore the team's morale, and handle those who unable or unwilling to go along.

Without effective responses from upper management, tensions and frustrations can fester in perpetuity. Yet, openly going over your supervisor's head in many corporations is often self-destructive. Do you think the lack of effective management is undermining your workplace satisfaction? What are your options? Who can you trust to get a perspective on the situation?

What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not been discovered.
--Ralph Waldo Emerson

12. **Do you fit in?** Recently, managers are moving away from believing everyone should fit into any environment or role. Instead, current thinking recommends that managers identify the strengths of workers and select positions that best use and grow those strengths. Have you tried everything you can in your current position without resolution of conflict or dissatisfaction? What do you think are your strengths? What would the characteristics be of a situation that was a better fit? If so, do you have options to move to other positions that are a better fit for you?

While current managerial trends recommend understanding the emotional needs of employees, old ways die slowly. If you're in a conflictual work environment and you can't ease the tension between people, you may still be able to reduce the stress you feel. Stress management techniques abound; there is no doubt that you can find one or more that suits your style and situation.

For more information on this topic, visit the American Psychological Association web page related to workplace issues and stress. <http://helping.apa.org/work/index.html>