



12 Conflict Resolution Techniques for Dealing With Conflict in the Workplace

1. Forget About Winning or Being Right

The only victory when it comes to dealing with conflict at work is a mutual one, that results in de-escalation, new common ground, and resolution. Viewing the person (or team) on the other side of a conflict as your opponent will doom both parties to remain adversaries, and undermines the following conflict resolution techniques that increase the possibility of a mutually beneficial outcome.

This can be difficult, especially if you have a history of butting heads or disagreeing with a particular individual, (or you are really sure you're right) but repeated conflict, no matter how small, makes this concept all the more important. Conflict, when approached in a mutual respectful atmosphere, can bring better insights about your team or client's expectations, communication styles, which can arm you with the best information to find a resolution that's best for the client, the team, and the project.

2. Don't Look For A Person To Blame – Look For A Root Cause

As Project Managers, we know very well that people make mistakes, as we are often the team member that catches them. Concentrating on an individual's mistake is possible without going as far as to place blame, and you can do so by looking at the point in the process where this mistake was made. Did this individual have the right information to do their job correctly? Did the checks and balances in your process act as they typically should? Was there some sort of loss of context when information changed hands?

Focusing on the process instead of chewing someone out helps prevent mistakes in future, and can leave your team confident that you have their back when things go awry. After all, everyone makes mistakes – even Project Managers.

3. Name Your Emotions Before Meeting

We're humans; imperfect, and often irrational. Taking a step back to figure out how we're really feeling is one of the best things one can do early on when handling conflict. It's one of the simplest conflict resolution techniques in that you can accomplish this step on your own, though it may not hurt to talk to a friend removed from the situation.

Naming your emotions helps you get to that root cause. You may feel angry, upset, maybe even betrayed – but what's at the heart of those feelings? You may feel angry because key aspects of a decision were



not communicated to you or your team, or not communicated at the right time – so you may feel disappointed that you were left out of the loop. This gives you a tangible example, as well as a relatable emotion, to aid in your communication and get to the root cause of a conflict.

4. Collaborate with The Other Party On How To Handle Conflict

Many workplace conflicts are borne of misunderstandings due to different communication styles – you may say one thing and a coworker may interpret it differently than you intended. This is inevitable, as the digital world means that we’re constantly messaging on slack, working remotely, and potentially haven’t met many of our team members in person. This can exacerbate the pitfalls of interpersonal and especially team conflict resolution, where there are more diverse personalities, communication preferences, and thus more opportunities for communication breakdown and conflict.

Inviting the other party to collaborate offers them an olive branch, showing that you’re open to their needs, are willing to listen, and that you understand that dealing with conflict in the workplace is a two-way street. And let us not forget that they may actually deliver some actionable insight on how to best communicate with them, and overall approach team conflict resolution.

5. Keep Your Conversation Goal-Oriented

Keeping things goal-oriented is second nature to many PMs as it’s inherent to our jobs. Unfortunately, it is frequently overlooked when translating an often technically-focused and directly measurable framework into something as emotional and messy as dealing with conflict at work.

We all know why conflict resolution is good, but what are the specific benefits that you can tie to a particular conflict? When assessing how to handle conflict with a coworker, you may find they are more open to discussion when you surface your goal. For instance “I want to find more collaborate ways for our teams to flag issues early in the process,” or “I want to take a look at our process so we can catch this next time,” or the more empathetic “I want to know what I can do better next time” all establish a two way street. This is essential when dealing with conflict in the workplace, and more likely to make our next tip (meeting face to face) more likely to happen, and more successful.

6. Meet Face to Face

Many introverts may shudder at this one, and understandably. Dealing with conflict in person can be pretty tricky, and comes with a few caveats, but is nonetheless incredibly important to support other conflict resolution techniques.



Modes Of Communication

Email, Slack, and phone calls all offer more opportunities for communication breakdowns than a good old fashioned in-person meeting. Email is inefficient and offers time for resentment and negative feelings to marinate, along with the high possibility that your text may be misinterpreted, especially when either party may be feeling defensive. Slack may not leave time for considerate conversation, and phone calls rob us of important emotional cues in the other party's face and body language.

In short, many conflict resolution techniques lose their potency when separated from visual emotional cues. This does require a little bit of vulnerability on your part as well – you may need to be comfortable displaying certain emotions while keeping others in check. Writing down a few bullet points or talking out your talking points with a neutral party can be a helpful step if you're afraid you may be too emotional in the moment; just remember that you don't want to ambush your coworkers with a long script when you should be inviting a dialogue.

Overcoming “The Ask”

Admittedly, meeting in person is easier said than done. Asking for an in-person meeting can be very intimidating for either party – they may think “what did I do that we actually need to have a meeting about it?” This can also be interpreted as somewhat aggressive, especially if your company does not have channels or process in place to make this ask easier for team mates. However, relying on handy conflict resolution techniques #4 (“collaborate with the other party”) and #5 (“keep your conversation goal oriented”) can limit this effect; asking them how and when they'd like to meet, in addition to attaching a desired goal to that conversation, can make the other party more open to the conversation.

Perfect Timing

Finding the right time can also be challenging; we don't necessarily want to meet when emotions are still running high, but we don't want to let negative feelings marinate. We also don't want to force people into a dialogue before they're ready (particularly more introverted folks who may need more time to inventory and articulate their thoughts), but we don't want to wait too long that the issue is deprioritized. This is another opportunity to lean on #5 (collaborate with the other party), by creating a dialogue about when the best opportunity for the discussion may be.

As A Mediating Manager

As a manager handling conflict between others, forcing people to have a conversation before they're ready can be a bad move; they may feel pressured to “kiss and make up” without any real discussion or conflict resolution, especially if a supervisor is present for the conversation. Dependent upon your read of the team conflict (and the self-awareness of the employees in question), it may be best to meet with



each party separately. Give each the opportunity to vent a little, feel listened to, and take emotional inventory. This will also give you a better understanding of whether or not you should encourage these employees to work it out themselves (with some helpful tips and perhaps even a company framework provided by you), or if a third party should be present to help translate and de-escalate.

7. Legitimize & Echo Their Feelings Back to Them

When assessing how to handle conflict with a coworker, finding a source of an individual's frustration and recognizing it aloud to them validates what they're feeling. It shows that not only are you willing to listen, but that you're a good listener. As communication is at the heart of every successful conflict resolution techniques, the importance of listening and specifically showing that you're listening, not only aid in the conflict at hand, but create a more open space to deal with future conflict.

Articulating concepts and feelings that the other party expresses is also an essential part of our PM toolkit; when you articulate a feeling back to the other party, this will either confirm to the them that you understand their viewpoint, or give them an opportunity to point out any discrepancies in your understanding of the problem at hand.

8. Find an Opportunity To Admit You Were Wrong, or What You Could Have Done Better

While not super fun, turning the spotlight of you or your own team's behavior is one of the quintessential conflict resolution techniques, but luckily is in the nature of many Project Managers. We build process; evaluating our own behavior as the people driving process is necessary to flag breakdowns in communication, bottlenecks, and where expectations could be set better. Let's face it – there's always something we can be doing better for our teams or clients.

Offering an example of something you'd like to do differently in future creates an open atmosphere for others to evaluate their own behavior. The more often you do so, the stronger this aspect of your team's culture becomes. If everyone feels safe when surfacing their own missteps, questions of how to handle conflict at work become secondary as issues can be dissected in a conflict-free zone.

9. Never Tell Someone What They Said, How They Felt, Or What They Did

This one is straight from the HR books of documented conflict resolution techniques, but unfortunately is not yet at the forefront of how we communicate when dealing with conflict in the workplace. Human memory is fallible, especially when it comes to recalling what people said in emotionally charged conversations, or how they acted in the past. Using language like "I felt" vs. "you said" removes any



aspect of blame from the conversation, and does not guess at the other party's intentions which you very well may have misinterpreted in the moment.

For instance, instead of saying, "You shut down the conversation so the developers could not talk about their issues with the project," you should say, "When the conversation ended, it felt like the development team didn't have the opportunity to express the issues they encountered – meaning we may miss out on learnings and efficiencies." This even has a little bit of #6 thrown in – keeping the conversation goal oriented and gaining future efficiencies from present learnings.

10. Focus On Behavior, Not Personality

Zeroing in on an individual team member's personality traits, vs. their behavior, can quickly create a toxic atmosphere and undermine other successful conflict resolution techniques you're employing.

For example, a manager might tell a team leader "can be condescending" when speaking with other teammates. When asked for examples, the manager does not want to divulge names of other team members to avoid creating a negative dynamic, and to protect the open door policy. Instead of focusing on a tangible piece of behavior such as, "Try giving your team members more time to ask questions, and try to exercise patience when answering," focusing on a personality trait (that the person may not even believe they have) does not provide actionable next steps to either party. Furthermore, the absence of examples of behavior creates an assumption that the person is aware of the problematic behavior as it happens – and maybe even purposefully behaving that way – which is often not the case.

11. Communicate the Takeaways And Apply Learnings For Next Time

What's the point of all these tricky conversations if we don't come away with learnings to improve our team dynamics, process, and culture? Documenting breakdowns in communication and their source can help desilo teams that should work more collaboratively. Stating actions that each party will take in future as a result of the conversation arms employees and managers alike with conflict resolution techniques (and maybe even prevention techniques!) that make future conversations much easier.

This also shows a commitment to growth in both parties. There is no worse feeling than going through a difficult, conflict-ridden discourse with your team to feel it was all for naught, which can also make people less likely to address issues or conflict in future.

12. Create Space for Conversation And Have Open Channels To Address Conflict

Easier said than done. However, having the proper culture, channels for communication, and processes in place before conflict arises makes all of the above conflict resolution techniques more likely to succeed, and helps set expectations for your team on how to deal with tricky situations.



Clear channels for peer feedback, or bottom-up feedback (yes, employee to manager) are absolutely essential in building an aligned, cohesive team. If an employee is not empowered, or more importantly, doesn't feel empowered to raise issues to their managers or peers in a neutral zone, it's likely to never happen until things reach a boiling point, or worse, the employee quits. Scheduling regular "one on ones" with a feedback framework within and across teams can act as a bit of a pressure valve to ensure that any problematic dynamics can be addressed before they get in the way of project throughput or start to create a toxic atmosphere.

If you want to glean the insight and full value of your more introverted team members, you can't afford to overlook the need for feedback channels. A lot of individuals will not feel comfortable asking for the opportunity to give feedback, but may jump at the chance if the opportunity is presented. Not everyone will have a take-charge attitude when it comes to handling conflict, so providing the path to resolution vs. relying on employees to find their own path ensures regular, healthy communication.





About the Author

Eric Williamson, author of *How to Work with Jerks*, professional development consultant, and President/CEO of Tailored Training Solutions, LLC, has a vision of success that is inherently different than most. With two decades of real-life, hands-on, in-the-trenches experience in both public and private sectors, Eric has worked with companies and institutions, both large and small, including Connecticut College, Maryland School of Nursing, Maryland Department of Labor, and the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Through his experience, Eric has learned that success is not about good grades, high IQ scores, or climbing up the corporate ladder. Eric believes that no matter how talented, gifted, or experienced, and no matter what role we serve or title we carry, our level of success is not measured based on the work we produce; it is measured based on the relationships we build. To that end, he works with organizations to build successful leaders by building stronger customer and workplace relationships.

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