

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Managing Conflict With Co-Workers

The best way to begin managing conflict you find yourself in with co-workers is to take stock of the situation, and make some assessments about how important the thing is that you are fighting over, and what the best way is to resolve the situation. In the workplace, you are by necessity a team player working with others for the good of the company. You have to work with the people you typically find yourself in conflict with, and may likely need to continue to work with these people long after the immediate crisis is over. Your ongoing relationship with those other employees with whom you are conflicted, and with the company as a whole need to be taken into account as you think about how to manage the conflict.

Sometimes conflicts arise out of simple misunderstandings. One person may say something they thought was harmless, but which ends up insulting another person. In such situations, a good first step is to assume that the insulting person did not mean to be insulting, and to talk to him or her so as to let them know, in an assertive but not aggressive way that you perceived their behavior to be out of line. This sort of simple feedback can often be enough to elicit an apology, and resolve the issue.

If you are having significant conflicts with another employee it is often wise to seek help in achieving a negotiated settlement either through your supervisor or human resources. However, if you are wise you will get prepared to present your side of the issue before you make your move. This preparation will involve doing some homework. You need to think through and document:

- What has lead up to the current problem? Do you have or can you develop a factual time line of the problem's evolution? (This is particularly true in the case of a sexual harassment or other such claim.) Are there other employees who will back you up?
- Is there a company policy or a set of procedures to follow for the problem you are experiencing? Will you elect to use this option?
- Who are the other people who are involved and what is your perspective on their role in the problem and its resolution? What would each of them think about the situation? Would your viewpoints differ substantially? Can you see any truth in the other side(s) perspective?
- How do you want this problem to be resolved?
- What goals are important to you?
- What do you expect the other side to ask for?
- How entrenched are your demands and those of the other party or parties?
- Can you tell if there are hidden agendas that your co-workers might have, such as wanting you job?
- What do you think each side might be willing to settle on?

Once you have some understanding of your adversary's position you will be better equipped to predict their arguments and to prepare for them. Once you have gathered this information use it in developing your own strategy. If your issue is serious you need to establish a track record of having tried to resolve the problem within the organization unless the problem is so serious that you fear for your safety and immediate outside intervention seems imperative.

Some types of workplace conflict arise out of competition for resources, and are not necessarily amenable to solutions involving better communication. If there is only one open position at the managerial level and you want that position while a co-worker also wants the job you may launch a win-lose competition. It might be useful to have a strategy in mind for rebuilding relations with that person should you be fortunate enough to win, and a separate strategy in mind if you should lose and become

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subordinate to that co-worker. All out competition is in your interests only if you can afford to risk losing and the impact of the other person losing will not come back to haunt you later.

The best way to resolve conflict is generally through collaboration and compromise. If you can win and the other party wins at the same time you have resolved one conflict without creating another. You can sit down with your opponent and say: "Look I would like for both of us to get something out of this rather than a winner take all approach." Then begin to negotiate a good solution.

Negotiations can result in one side "winning" and obtaining the lion's share of resources or in both sides obtaining some things they want and a share of the resources. Remember the ultimate goal is to satisfy the fundamental interests of both sides. "Winning" it all may work in a one-encounter or short-term relationship, but a "win-win" solution is more important in long-term relationships such as exist in most workplaces.

Regardless of the track you follow to have your grievance/problem with another employee heard, knowledge of possible negotiating strategies is to your advantage, especially if you can think of ways to frame what you want so that it fits into several of these strategies. In any case it is always to your advantage to:

- Not begin a negotiation with completely outlandish demands
- Focus on underlying interests, not disputed positions, i.e., how can your solution benefit the workplace and its environment
- Above all remember that a short-term win may be exciting but if it perpetuates the conflict or delays a future battle it may be a Pyrrhic (very short lived) victory.

You can serve your organization better by making every effort to avoid making any conflict with other employees a relationship conflict. Those kinds of conflicts are most difficult to redress. If you feel you have fallen into that sort of pattern and you believe the conflict could have a damaging effect on work performance or productivity you may want to bring the matter to your supervisor. If you do so be open to taking your share of the blame. Do not go in pointing fingers or you may find yourself unemployed.