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Conflict management: Resolving difficult situations

From MayoClinic.com Special to CNN.com

You missed the mark on a major work assignment, and your boss is giving you the evil eye. How do you explain it was because others didn't meet their deadlines — without it sounding like a feeble excuse? And the person in the next cubicle is always making loud personal calls — which you find distracting — at the most inopportune times. Is it your place to tell her to handle her personal affairs on her own time?

Conflict at work may seem like something to avoid. But it doesn't have to be. By learning how to manage conflict effectively, you'll create better relationships, open yourself up to new alternatives and enhance your overall job satisfaction.

Consider the scenario with your boss. If you have an open and honest discussion about what sidetracked the big project, chances are he or she will be less upset and even able to help you keep your team on track with deadlines. And your loud co-worker might not even realize that she's broadcasting her personal life all over the office and might just thank you for pointing it out.

Conflicts consist of two major components — the issue at hand and the relationship between those involved. You might find that you repeatedly knock heads with someone in the office over seemingly trivial matters. Unless the relationship component is addressed, conflicts only remain idle until the next issue arises.

If you don't feel very confident in your conflict management skills, take heart. Think of conflict as an opportunity to make a positive change, and you're halfway there in terms of a solution. The following basic strategies should take you the rest of the way.

- **Acknowledge the problem.** Effectively managing a conflict requires facing up to it. Ignoring a conflict won't make it go away. Sometimes avoiding an unpleasant situation does buy you time while you ponder your next step. But unless you're willing to live with the way things are and let the conflict go unresolved, you'll have to confront it eventually. And better off sooner than later.
- **Focus on the issue.** If the problem is complex, focus on one issue at a time. In fact, most conflicts have several components. Break the problem down so that a satisfactory resolution won't seem unattainable.
- **Discuss matters privately.** Decide on a specific time and place to meet, preferably on neutral ground. Keep any issue private until you've had a chance to discuss and try to resolve it.
- **Choose your words carefully.** Use "I" statements — "I think

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... I feel ... I need ... " — and avoid placing blame. Being blamed for something usually only makes the other person angry. Be positive — after all, you're trying to resolve the conflict. Stay away from the role of the naysayer — someone who offers only criticism and pessimism about all proposed solutions. Speak your mind, but stick to the facts at hand.

- **Be direct.** Say what you mean in a clear and direct manner. Don't be ambiguous. If you don't communicate your wants or needs clearly, the other person won't know where you're coming from. No one can read another person's mind. Be prepared to back up your statements with explanations of why you need something or feel the way you do. If the conversation gets heated, try your best not to argue. You want to find a solution rather than prove that the other person is wrong.
- **Keep your emotions in check.** It's understandable that you might get emotional if you have something at stake. But venting your emotions may only prevent you from expressing your views logically. Anger, for example, often leads to a negative and destructive conversation. If a situation becomes explosive, wait for another opportunity to discuss the matter.
- **Listen.** Be sure to listen to what the other person is saying. Remember that listening involves more than just hearing the words. Try hard to understand the situation from the other point of view. Ask questions to help you know what the other person's needs and concerns are. Pay attention to nonverbal cues, such as body language. If you each approach things with a clear understanding of the other's perspective, you'll probably agree on a solution.
- **Be prepared.** Do your homework. Remember — the goal is to come up with solutions that satisfy both you and the other person. If your first idea is rejected, have a plan B. Consider possible objections ahead of time and be prepared to offer an alternative. If you've done your homework and understand the other person's concerns, it will show. And you'll probably reach an agreement that you both find acceptable.
- **Put your heads together.** As the saying goes, "Two heads are better than one." Approach the person with whom you're having trouble about finding a solution. See if you can agree to collaborate on reaching the best solution to the issue involved. Essentially, agree to work together to resolve the problem. Once you each achieve a common goal, you're off to a good start.
- **Be willing to compromise.** As you approach the situation, recognize that you and the other person each have something at stake. Find ways to meet in the middle, if necessary. Compromise is most effective when each person feels right, to a certain degree, despite differing opinions. Before negotiating a compromise, make clear which issues are negotiable and which are not. Compromise may be the best solution when issues are complex and the balance of power in the relationship is tenuous.
- **Push ego aside.** Creating win-win solutions is ideal, but be careful not to let a competitive nature get in your way. If you focus only on winning — "I've got to be the winner in this!" — then someone inevitably ends up losing.
- **Accept personality differences.** You might find yourself repeatedly clashing with the same person over minor issues. You might have to accept that you have a personality conflict. It's harder to let the little things go when you don't particularly like a person. But try to keep your differences from negatively impacting your working relationship. The bottom line is, you have little direct control over a colleague's behaviors and opinions. You're better off focusing your energy on how you can modify your own actions to prevent an unpleasant situation.

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- **Seek help.** If the problem proves too big to handle alone, or you just can't seem to reach an agreement, consider seeking help from a third party. In many instances, your supervisor can act as a go-between in a difficult situation. Or you could talk with an employee assistance counselor who can help develop ground rules for discussions to promote respectful communication.
- **Take action.** Once you've identified a solution, follow through on the agreed course of action. Then follow up. Tension and conflict will probably remain if you don't keep the lines of communication open. Check back from time to time.

Above all else, keep things in perspective. Is this something you can live with? To figure that out, consider the test of three. Will this matter to you in 3 hours, 3 days or 3 weeks? If the answer is no, think twice before confronting a situation. It might be better to just let the storm blow over and direct your time and energy elsewhere.

March 07, 2003

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