



Profit Through Improved Communication

Conflicts and Productive Meetings

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However you look at it, in business conflict is necessary. It may seem counterintuitive, but *conflict can be healthy*. In fact, healthy conflict is needed to get the best out of all members of a team. Mismanaged conflict can be a disastrous experience for your team, but good conflicts inspire growth. Conflicts bring teams closer to their goals and objectives. They force your hand like little else can.

So, how do you handle conflicts on the job? What about confrontations and distractions at meetings? Since conflicts are inevitable (and given the right planning, even desirable), you might assume planning for conflict should be a given, but it's not. You likely have some meetings coming up shortly. How are you going to deal with conflict at those moments? What about managing an outspoken individual? What would you say to an assertive colleague, someone who takes you on in front of your colleagues or staff? What about dealing with “under the breath comments” or individuals using powerful body language to assert their opinions? Conflict can be devastating, unless you are ready to welcome it, know its stages, and know how to manage it. If you plan ahead, you will be able to turn even the worst conflicts into worthwhile experiences.

Good Conflict

A good conflict is when two people have opposing views on a topic. An intelligent, thoughtful debate happens when *individuals attack the topics, not each other*. All sides are stretched to define and make a case. All sides are heard and honored. The players are equal. The playing field is level. There are no victims, only mutually-accepted decisions. All players bring out the best in each other. Good conflicts inspire such positive outcomes as new ideas, motivation, problem-solving, creativity, energy, new directions, and teamwork.

Bad Conflict

A bad conflict is any conflict where individuals personally attack other individuals and hurt feelings. Ineffective resolutions and more conflicts are the results. Bad conflicts cause damage; good conflicts improve outcomes, solve problems, and push individuals to the next level of excellence.

Rules of Conflict

The feelings associated with a conflict can cause a group to spiral out of control quickly, so conflict must be choreographed with a deft touch. Two rules to remember about conflict are:

Conflict is communication.

What is said and not said, glances up/down/sideways, expressions and looks, moving positions, and sighs are all kinds of communications.

Every movement, sound, and gesture in body language is done for a reason and means something. Maybe not every aspect of body language is *important by itself*, but taken as a whole package, body language is

always communicating information. Added up, body language is extremely important to understand, especially when discussing delicate topics.

Face conflict directly.

If you avoid, ignore, or suppress conflict in yourself or others (e.g., if you tell your people to “get over it,” “be adults,” “leave your personal agendas at the door,” etc.), you have in essence buried your head in the sand. Those kind of dismissive directions to yourself or others don’t make conflicts go away. Trying to disassociate emotions from business is misguided. You’ve just made it more difficult to manage what will be there, even if you pretend it isn’t. Make no mistake about it: conflict is still in charge. Avoided, ignored, or suppressed conflict will simply go underground and, unfortunately, underground is where it can and will do the most damage. Be wise. Be ready to face conflict directly.

Catch Conflicts Early

Conflict usually gets out of hand because the warning signs are not seen or acknowledged soon enough to engage alternative courses of action. Sometimes people see the signs of conflict, but don’t know the correct way to diffuse, confront, or embrace the conflict. The following list will show you what to look for and how to approach the conflicts you will surely face.

Know the warning signs unique to your situation. Acknowledge these emotional signs while the challenges are small, because it is easier and less expensive to resolve these matters sooner rather than later. The sooner you acknowledge the signs of conflict, the sooner the conflict will be resolved.

Behaviors and Signs of Underlying Conflict

Behavior	Appearance	Motive
Ideas get attacked before they are fully stated.	Looks like impatience.	Might be fear of change.
Comments made are of a personal nature or are laced with a hidden agenda.	Looks like bullying.	Might be another kind of misplaced anger. Be especially sensitive to these, as they are deep-rooted conflicts that will fester until they are resolved. If you even suspect a punch has been thrown, it probably has. Don’t wait. Address it.
Suggestions are made that don’t build on previous ideas.	Looks like misunderstanding or disrespect.	Might be poor communication skills.
Some people are experiencing Win-Lose pressures.	Looks like a power struggle; probably is a power struggle.	Might be anger, fear, or poor communication skills.
Victim mentality takes hold.	Looks sad or overwhelmed.	Might be feelings of inadequacy.
Members take sides.	Looks like a power struggle.	Might be fear or need to belong.

Processing through a Conflict

Feelings cannot realistically be left outside of a meeting. You cannot separate the relationships from the people. Acknowledge the obvious conflicts: the feelings, glances, sideways looks, snide remarks, etc. Get these actions, statements, and behaviors out into the open and work through them, or they *WILL* sabotage your best efforts. Do your best to remain neutral and respect people's right to have their own feelings and interpretations, but call it like it is. Encourage direct expression of frustration, anger, confusion, doubt, and other negative feelings. Exhausting these feelings will remove their power to subversively control the communication event. As Steven Covey (1989) states in his groundbreaking work, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "seek first to fully understand, and only then seek to be understood."

Be proactive! Recognize that conflict is an inevitable, natural, and a very productive aspect of the team process. Mutually agree that a resolution is desirable and achievable. Empathize with each other. Listen from the other person's point of view, or agree to switch positions and argue the opposing point. (Yes, this may sound crazy, but it gets amazing results!)

Steps to Improve Listening and Increase Empathy during Conflicts

1. Observe silence. Use the silence for reflection. Time in silence also allows people to cool down, collect their thoughts, and/or move in a more productive direction.
2. Take a break or change your venue. Sometimes the best strategy is to come back at a better time or move to a new locale.
3. Share concerns. Try round-robin sharing which is highly structured and guarantees each person a turn. Ask probing prompts: How is this helping or hurting? How may we learn from these behaviors? What may we do differently to be more productive in the future? What do you need right now?
4. Identify areas of conflict and commonality that will bridge the gap between participants.
5. Refocus conversations back onto original topics/objectives. Redirect attention to end results or goals and work backwards from there.
 - Move from problem identification to *solutions* and desired end results.
 - Clarify small points and check for understanding.
 - Require listening: Leaders and/or each participant must sit and *listen* to each other person for 10-20 minutes, without thinking or verbalizing any responses. Just listen. This is huge.

Deal with Unruly Behavior Immediately

- Establish ground rules before problems occur and refer to ground rules often.
- Leaders or members of the group should quickly confront unruly behavior.
- Expect all participants to share responsibilities for the meeting process.
- Leaders should meet privately with repeat offenders.

Deal with Hurtful or Unproductive Behaviors in a Consistent Manner.

- Start meetings precisely on time. Don't update late arrivers.
- Silence side conversations by stopping the meeting and looking at offenders. Ask if they would like to share their ideas. Get agreement to listen and take turns.
- Squelch "dominators" by involving them with a meeting task, such as asking them to scribe on the flip chart. Seek input from all members in relation to "dominators" and refer to ground rules to get agreement that all are equal players and the playing field will remain level.
- Draw quiet members out periodically, but remember not to put them on the spot. Notice their facial expressions regarding topics of interest. Ask them to contribute, and allow them time to collect their thoughts.

- Keep the agenda and topic focused. Don't allow people to ramble. You may have established time limits for talking in your ground rules. Stick to them.
- Negativity: Ask the group to comment on negative opinions or behaviors. Check for agreement / disagreement.

Choose Your Words Thoughtfully

Often the words you choose make the difference between turmoil and success. These are some sentence starters that will assist you communicating effectively at meetings:

If your goal is to:	Sentence starter:
Propose an idea	How about...
Build on someone else's idea	To build on Katherine's ideas, I'd like to add...
Seek information	Please describe...
Seek an opinion	How do you feel about...
Give information	Here is my report on...
Give an opinion	My opinion is...
Disagree	I disagree with Ron because...
Summarize	To recap the issue...
Test comprehension / check for understanding	I heard you say...
Check for consensus	How many agree with...
Encourage	Please say more about...
Check about performance or a goal	How close are we to meeting...
Setting a standard	We need to decide this by...
Relieve tension	The humor is this is...
Paraphrasing	In other words...

Closure Procedures Matter

Closure does not only happen at the end of any meeting or conflict. It happens throughout the entire process. Seek closure by summarizing and generating conclusions and/or action items throughout. Record agreements and action plans on a flip chart. Be sure your team has covered these points:

- What actions have been decided?
- What decisions have been made?
- Who is responsible for what and by when? Be precise with dates, times, and amounts.
- What are agenda items for next time?
- What issues still remain open or on the table?
- Who has homework between now and next meeting and what is it?

Reflective Evaluation to Improve Your Practice

The only way to strengthen meetings is to improve on what works, and eliminate or change what doesn't.

- Review the *process* as a team. Discuss and agree on how the process helped or hindered arriving at the outcomes, decisions, and actions.
- Debrief your agenda and the meeting to improve future communications.
- Prepare an improved agenda for the next meeting.
- Make clear notes of any homework to be done and who is responsible for what, etc.

Are you ready to use conflict to take your meetings to the next level? Are you ready to use conflict to take your meetings to the next level? We can show you how to leverage conflict to increase profits and market share.