



## **Managing Interpersonal, Intergroup, and Intragroup Conflict**

### **Introduction**

Workplace conflict – including between individuals (interpersonal), within teams or groups (intergroup), and between teams or groups (intragroup) – collectively costs US organizations about \$359 billion per year in lost time and other costs.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, the negative effects of workplace conflict extend further. Destructive conflict causes work disruptions, decreased productivity, project failure, absenteeism, turnover, termination, and stress. When leaders resolve negative conflict, worker health and resiliency improve, and teammates can work to build or rebuild trust. Reducing or eliminating harmful conflict leads to better relationships and more positivity at work, which means more collaboration and greater productivity.

As conflict coaches, leaders play a critical role in developing conflict resolution skills and attitudes among their teams. As conflict mediators, they facilitate dispute resolutions among team members and groups. But before a disagreement even becomes a conflict, good leaders and managers often spot the triggers and defuse the situations. The most skilled leaders in this respect assess conflict not necessarily to quash it, but oftentimes to steer it toward productive and civil discourse. After all, without constructive conflict, people and teams simply agree with one another, causing ideas, creativity, and innovation to stall.

This white paper provides information about workplace conflict, supported by empirical research, along with proven tips on how to manage conflict before it escalates, or to resolve it when it occurs. Leaders who read this paper will understand the costs of workplace conflict and their role as conflict coach and mediator. They will learn how to proactively recognize and prevent major conflict between team members and within groups.

### **Recognizing and Mitigating the Common Drivers of Conflict in Organizations**

Be mindful of the catalysts and triggers of potentially harmful conflict. Employees may dispute access to resources, but in most organizations, instances of serious, destructive conflict stemming from resource competition are rare, even at budget time. Most conflict is, at its root,

---

<sup>1</sup> Inc. Magazine (2017) *Workplace conflict costs \$359 Billion, According to Science*. See: <https://www.inc.com/brian-de-haaff/the-359-billion-problem-driving-your-project-under-the-radar.html>

emotional, whether an individual is feeling disrespected, unheard and excluded, or feeling untrusted or distrustful of others. Indeed, the most common source of conflict in organizations stems from simple misunderstandings that can often be resolved with minimal intervention.

Other common sources of conflict can be more complex. Watch for the early signs. Emotional cues can be valuable indicators that something is not right. Another major driver of conflict are biases that may be conscious or unconscious.

As a leader, you might provoke conflict if you do not communicate your expectations clearly. Further, if performance measures that lead to promotions, salary increases, or other incentives are not fair and transparent, you can expect ongoing dissatisfaction and conflict. Even organizational structure, processes, and rules can cause conflict if they are poorly structured or instituted, or applied inconsistently. To deal effectively with conflict, it is important to understand the causes, and to be confident that you can manage it. If you avoid or ignore conflict, you might create a dangerous situation because conflict never just goes away; it festers and will eventually require attention to resolve and heal.

### Listen Intently

Defuse conflicts by using deep and attentive listening. Pay attention to topics people seem hesitant to discuss. Often, those clues help to narrow down the root of the conflict. Appreciate other people's feelings and defer judgment. Listen actively and empathetically with your eyes by noting gestures, facial expressions, posture, and demeanor. Use reflective responses to communicate questions such as, "This is what I'm hearing you say. Do I understand the situation correctly?" Allow others to maintain control of the conversation, which in turns ensures that you are sure to remain in deep listening mode.

Though active listening allows you to accept the message, it does not require you to understand the messenger. Listen without an agenda, truly engage with what others say, and put yourself in their shoes. Do not try to form a response while you are listening; instead, focus entirely on others' words.

### Communicate to Build Trust

Establish direct lines of communication between co-workers. Invest in building trusting relationships. Your colleagues will be more likely to trust you and each other if they understand one another and can predict each other's behavior. Share your thoughts on relevant issues, and ask thoughtful questions that show people you value their input. Practice transparency and encourage it throughout your teams.

People trust those they view as credible. Build trust by demonstrating reliability. Encourage colleagues to share and keep abreast of one another's work and achievements. Be transparent about any challenges the team or organization is facing. Create shared values and a culture that emphasizes integrity and shuns corrosive behaviors like talking behind each other's backs.

#### Lead by Example

Demonstrate your integrity with positive actions, such as admitting mistakes when you are wrong. Remember that trust is often reciprocal; as a leader, be the first to extend trust and respect. When you trust and respect others, they are likely to extend trust and respect in return. Avoid contradicting, questioning or upstaging colleagues or team members – doing so harms your connection with them. When you fail to validate your colleagues, you trigger resistance to your ideas. Strengthen your connections by choosing your words with care and staying aware of your tone of voice and body language.

#### Clarify Expectations

Failing to set expectations creates conflict and frustration. It also wastes time, because tasks are often completed incorrectly when expectations are not clear, requiring them to be redone. In order to set clear expectations, you should let team members know exactly what you and leaders at different levels of NAVFAC expect – both explicitly and implicitly – from their work. Make sure that performance measurement systems are applied consistently and fairly.

#### Act

Don't let a potentially harmful conflict escalate; instead, try to diagnose the reasons behind the conflict so you can help to resolve it. *When* you choose to deal with a conflict can make all the difference. If you address a conflict early in its gestation, you can create more space for a possible resolution. Nevertheless, remain alert to the possibility that disagreements sometimes work themselves out. With that in mind, take care not to blow arguments or disputes out of proportion. Use a tool or checklist like that in Figure 1 to assess the seriousness of a conflict before deciding on a course of action.

Figure 1: Conflict Assessment Worksheet (used with permission by Fifthhouse Group)

## Conflict Assessment Worksheet

Criteria	Rating
<b>Emotions:</b> <i>Your feelings and those of others involved in the situation.</i> (1 = Low levels of emotion; 5 = intense or high levels of emotion)	1   2   3   4   5
<b>Trust:</b> <i>Confidence in those involved in the situation.</i> (1 = Good, strong trust between people; 5 = Poor or no trust)	1   2   3   4   5
<b>History:</b> <i>The background of the conflict.</i> (1 = Little or no prior history of conflict between those involved; 5 = long or substantial history of conflict)	1   2   3   4   5
<b>Power:</b> <i>The distribution of control, influence, or authority in the relationship.</i> (1 = Equality of power; fair and balanced; 5 = great imbalance; high inequality)	1   2   3   4   5
<b>Total score:</b>	
<b>Interpretation:</b> A score of <b>4-6</b> indicates you can probably safely handle this situation on your own; <b>7-13</b> indicates you should probably seek some third party assistance; <b>14-20</b> indicates you should probably not attempt to resolve the conflict without some professional intervention.	

### The Role of Leader as Conflict Coach

As a “conflict coach” you can assist individuals by guiding them through a conflict and helping them find a way out of it. Managers, team leaders or executives – even senior peers – can act as coaches. How the conflict coach functions varies, depending on the context. Parties to the conflict might choose to have a casual relationship with the coach, or they might seek a more formal arrangement by asking the coach to guide them step-by-step through the conflict.

Resolving the conflict, however, is not the coach’s responsibility. Instead, they should try to assist the process of resolution by helping everyone involved find acceptable options. The coach remains supportive and non-judgmental and is, for all intents and purposes, the champion for the individual. While therapeutic, coaching is not therapy or counseling.

It is important to note that conflict coaching is not always about resolving conflict. Individuals may seek coaching to work on ways to prevent a dispute from unnecessarily escalating, to improve their competency in conflict management, to develop stronger communication skills for a difficult conversation, or to pursue other objectives that are often more about managing conflict than resolving it.

### **The Leader as Conflict Mediator**

Where conflict coaching does not lead to resolution, the next step may be conflict mediation. Even though you may think it is required, always make conflict mediation voluntary. A conflict mediator facilitates a discussion with two or more parties in a dispute. They maintain strict neutrality and are never a champion of one party. Generally, mediators focus on facilitating negotiations and discussions to assist both (or all) parties, who identify their interests and work towards resolution of their differences. They help the parties in a conflict come to a mutually acceptable solution, but they avoid providing guidance.

### **The Seven Principles of Defusing Conflict**

You will probably not succeed in preventing *all* destructive conflict. When your measures to prevent conflict fail, you may have no choice but to take action to address it. Consider the following seven principles in resolving destructive conflict.<sup>2</sup>

- 1. Acknowledge the conflict:** If you do not accept that a dispute exists, you risk letting it slide. If, as a leader, you find yourself worrying about the situation at night, it is probably time to acknowledge it. That does not mean you have to try to resolve the issue immediately, but you should accept the conflict as a potential problem. This lets you see things more clearly so you can start to deal with them.
- 2. Control your response:** Once you have decided to intervene, plan your response. Think clearly about the situation, evaluate your position, and decide how to act. This might include coaching or asking the parties to join a mediation.
- 3. Get your facts straight:** Prepare yourself with factual information so you do not err when you enter into a conversation, regardless of your role in the conflict process.
- 4. Identify and think through outcomes and options:** Even though the parties to the conflict should arrive at their own resolution, as conflict coach, mediator or one of the parties, you should think through the various ways the conflict might be resolved.
- 5. Consider reframing the conflict:** Sometimes it helps when you, a neutral party, present the situation using a new perspective. Your own values might influence how you reframe the issue, but the purpose is to get the parties thinking about ways to break

---

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Louisa Weinstein's book: *The 7 Principles of Conflict Resolution* (and other sources). See: <https://www.amazon.com/7-Principles-Conflict-Resolution/dp/9353430127>

their logjam, not to find the answers on your own. Watch their body language and whether they seem uncomfortable about certain subjects. Give them time to reveal what is on their minds.

- 6. Manage the resolution:** Think of yourself as a “resolution agent.” A resolution agent undertakes many of the same activities as a conflict coach or a mediator. As in conflict mediation, you have an interest in helping the conflicting sides come to an agreement. Construct an environment in which the parties are energetic and more likely to collaborate toward a resolution. For example, schedule meetings mid-morning, when most people hit peak daily energy, and meet in a neutral location, preferably outside your normal workspace, even if it is within the same building.
- 7. Engage the safety net:** You may encounter situations where coaching, mediation, or other forms of conflict resolution do not work or are inappropriate. Evaluate your options before you act. Check with in-house counsel or human resources about alternatives and/or consult with subject matter experts.

## Conclusions

Organizational conflict, whether interpersonal, intergroup, or intragroup, is caused by many factors, but proven conditions, practices and techniques assist leaders in preventing destructive conflict from arising or managing it to resolution when it does occur. The steps outlined in this document will help leaders to manage workplace conflict more effectively.