

How to manage conflict in the workplace

Conflict at work is never easy to deal with and can take many forms. It may be that you just don't get on with a colleague or that you have a grievance against your manager. Conflict may take the form of rivalry between teams; or it may be apparent by the lack of trust and cooperation between large groups of employees and management. Conflict and confrontation often occur together, neither is very pleasant, but both are part of modern life. When a conflict arises you should try to take a calm approach and not react in a challenging or defensive way. It is also important that you don't ignore the problem as it needs to be dealt with. The best way to handle such situations is to face it with a clearly prepared plan of action.

The causes of conflict at work can often be put into the following categories:

- Poor management
- Unfair treatment
- Unclear job roles
- Inadequate training
- Poor communication
- Poor working environment
- Lack of equal opportunities
- Bullying and harassment

What are the typical responses to conflict?

Fight - you react in a challenging/defensive way. At work this may mean shouting or losing your temper.

Flight - you turn your back on what's going on. This is a common reaction - by ignoring a problem you hope it will go away.

Freeze - you are not sure how to react and become very passive/introverted. You might begin to deal with the issue but things drift or become drawn out through indecision.

Face - Approach a problem in a calm and rational way with a planned/prepared approach.

If some of this rings a bell in the workplace, then the following advice may help you to deal with things:

- **Investigating the problem informally** - simply talking and listening to try and give people the time to express their feelings and concerns can often help to clear the air. Does the person know that they are making you feel uncomfortable by the way they talk to you or make jokes? Does your line manager know that they are overlooking you for promotion and treating your colleague more favourably? Sometimes by just raising these issues in an informal way makes the problem go away much quicker.
- **Investigating the problem formally** – if the informal approach doesn't work then you may need to raise a grievance and take it to a more formal stage. Look at whether your company has procedures for raising grievances, this may be found on your company intranet site or in your employee handbook. This will most likely mean raising a complaint to your line manager or with HR.
- **Outside help e.g. Mediation** - Outside help is probably of most benefit between the informal and the formal stages of conflict but there are no hard and fast rules and it

partly depends on the kind of help you want. Mediation is the most common form of dispute resolution that an employer may use to help you at work if the above stages don't work. It involves an independent, impartial person helping two individuals or groups to reach a solution that is acceptable to everyone.

CASE STUDY - A

Your new Manager has just joined the team and is very inexperienced as a Manager. They constantly overlook your contribution to the team and shout at you across the desk when things don't go well. You find your Manager condescending, unapproachable and inflexible. Team meetings have become a painful experience because they accomplish nothing. It is very close to appraisal time and you are worried that you will not be treated fairly. What should you do?

Many new Managers can feel insecure and inexperienced at managing a new team and are not sure how to best deal with their team when things go wrong. Try and work with your Manager, be helpful and cooperative even if you feel at the time they aren't making the best decisions. Provide solutions to problems in team meetings and ensure that your Manager knows exactly what projects you are working on and forward on any feedback that your receive prior to the appraisal meeting.

CASE STUDY – B

Your colleague is constantly making inappropriate jokes and jibes about you. At first you found that you were able to deal with this but it is now becoming a daily ritual and the rest of the team are now joining in and it is starting to upset you. What should you do?

On many occasions your colleagues may not even realise that their jokes are upsetting you. The next time they make a joke ask them to stop and if you feel uncomfortable talking to them in the team environment ask them away from the desk and explain that the jokes are now starting to upset you and you would appreciate them stopping. If this does not work and your colleague continues then raise it formally with your line Manager or HR.

A good source of help is ACAS which have a guide to "Managing Conflict at Work"
www.acas.gov.uk