

# Dealing with conflict in the workplace

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By **Tom Fox** May 21, 2015

People want leadership roles for a variety of reasons, but the opportunity to manage conflicts is rarely at the top of anyone's list. It's a skill that many have a hard time mastering — and let's face it, avoiding conflict tends to be the first inclination for most of us.

Workplace conflicts can emerge in any number of forms, but there are some general, garden-variety types that I see on a repeated basis: conflicts with the boss, conflicts with peers and conflicts among a manager's direct reports or teammates.

In all of these cases, leaders need to consider two basic questions. How important is the issue? And, how important is this relationship? Your answers will determine whether to let it slide or try to resolve it. Let's explore each type.

## **Conflict with the boss**

I have encountered a lot of people who have conflicts with those in more senior positions, sometimes because their boss isn't doing enough to support the team or is doing too much micromanaging.

The relationship with your boss is obviously important for getting work done and for getting ahead. As a result, you should invest the time needed to resolve the conflict. The key question then becomes: What's my role in the conflict, and what can I do to improve the situation?

While it's easy (and maybe legitimate) to blame your boss, this unfortunately isn't the most productive option. If you actually want things to get better, you'll need a different approach. Schedule a conversation or a lunch so you can understand your boss's goals and motivations, express your concerns and explore ways to work better together. Getting insight into your boss's reasoning and outlook may spark ideas about new techniques for handling the situation.

Plus, the conversation will send a clear signal that you're interested in building a better bond and resolving the tension that exists. Finally, make it clear that you are quite willing to carry out any directions being given (assuming they are not immoral or unethical), but that you would first like to suggest a better way that can be helpful.

## **Conflict with a peer**

In today's working world, very little happens in isolation. You inevitably rely on others to get things done. For better and worse, however, we don't all operate in the same ways and so conflict is inevitable.

One of the best strategies I've heard for resolving conflicts with a peer comes from Solly Thomas, a coach in some of the Partnership for Public Service's leadership programs. Thomas, a former government executive, suggests identifying a colleague who has an effective working relationship with the peer who is giving you problems.

Make clear to the other colleague that your goal is to resolve the conflict and get work done, then tap into his or her knowledge of the other person for tips in getting along. Try out the advice, and perhaps also tactfully attempt to break the tension by talking with your colleague about possible middle ground.

### **Conflicts among direct reports or teammates**

Leaders at nearly every level have been the uncomfortable witnesses to conflicts among teammates. Your choices are basically to look away or jump into the fray.

If the conflict is with people you supervise, and you know they are not going to react well, avoiding the conflict is tempting but ineffective. One of my colleagues recounted a situation in a former office when — after spending too much time avoiding a confrontation with a subordinate who had a history of causing disruption — he decided to have the difficult conversation with her. He made sure to focus solely on the job-related behaviors and not infer motivation. Still, she became irate and cursed at him before storming out of his office. However, the next day she gave him a letter of resignation. Conflict resolved.

As a leader, you want to allow for a certain amount of creative tension, but the moment that conflict becomes counterproductive, you need to act. While the issues that cause conflict vary in importance, your relationships to teammates and the relationships among teammates must be functional if you hope to have a productive environment.

One option is to sit down with employees — separately or together — and make your work-related outcomes and behavioral expectations clear. Then, treat the employees as adults and ask them to resolve their differences. Let them know they will be held accountable if they don't.

If you have other tips or techniques or stories of workplace conflicts and how they were resolved, please share by leaving a comment below or by emailing me at [fedcoach@ourpublicservice.org](mailto:fedcoach@ourpublicservice.org).

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*Tom Fox, a guest writer for [On Leadership](#), is a vice president at the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service. He also heads the Partnership's Center for Government Leadership.*


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