

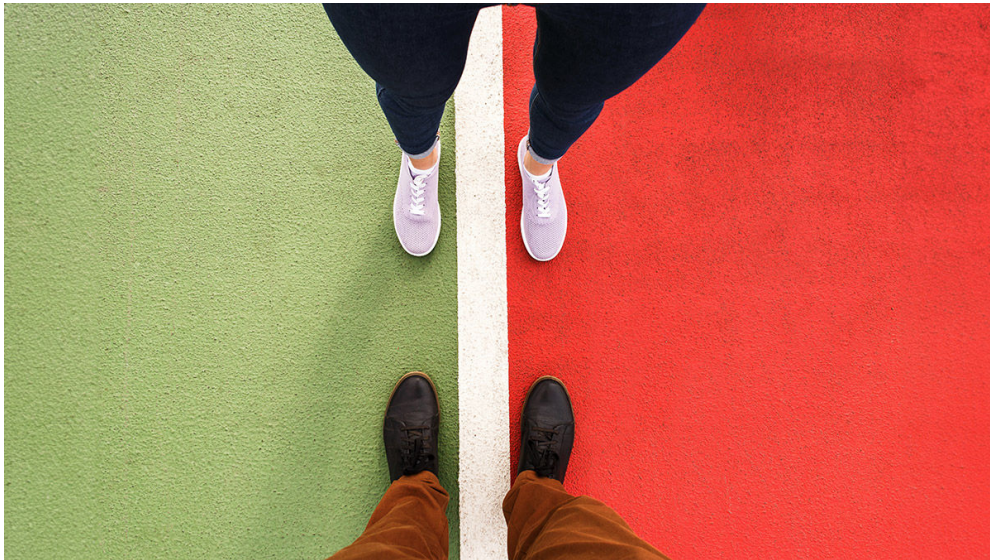


Digital Article / Managing Conflicts

How to Master Conflict Resolution

No matter what your job is, where you work, or who you work with, you'll need the skills to navigate disputes. *by Amy Gallo*

Published on HBR.org / October 21, 2024 / Reprint [H08G46](#)



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Let's get something out on the table: Workplace conflict is a normal, inevitable part of interacting with other people.

If you're involved in conflicts at work, it's not that there's something wrong with you, or the other person. In fact, there's no such thing as a conflict-free office. We disagree about whether and how to implement a new IT system. We battle over which strategic initiative to pursue. We engage in turf wars about who gets to lead a high-profile AI project. And

sometimes, we just act like passive-aggressive jerks toward one another. As uncomfortable and draining as it can be, conflict is something we all face. It's how we handle it that matters.

Whether you're deep in a disagreement with a colleague at this very moment, you're managing a team that can't seem to get along, or resolving conflicts is just a skill you want to get better at, I'm here to help. In this article, I'll explain what conflict resolution is, why it's an essential skill, and how to approach the conflict-resolution process. I'll also share a few principles that are helpful to keep in mind as you navigate any disagreement.

What Is Conflict Resolution?

At its very basic, conflict resolution is the process of addressing disagreements with the parties involved by finding mutually acceptable solutions. A productive process will likely include a focus on mutual benefit (what you both stand to gain), active listening from all parties, open communication, and some negotiation.

The “resolution” part isn't necessarily a hard-and-fast agreement on next steps. (Though that is helpful!) There are other less-tangible aspects that have benefits. For example, engaging in the process may result in a better mutual understanding (“Ah, now I get where you're coming from”), less tension, increased collaboration, and healthier, more resilient relationships.

Of course, the details of each specific resolution will vary depending on the type of conflict you're having. That said, in my book *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*, I define a resolution as having three components:

- **Your agreement should meet as many of your and your counterpart's interests as possible.** This focus on interests is

something that the Program on Negotiation (PON) at Harvard Law School strongly encourages in what they call principled negotiations.

- **The resolution should also be fair and reasonable.** This means that you *and* the other person both think it's a reasonable solution and you could defend it to anyone else who cares about the outcome. And you both need to be satisfied that the process you used to reach the agreement was fair.
- **The relationship still needs to be intact.** In the end, it's not a successful resolution if you end up hating each other. You want to be able to say that you maintained your relationship, or even improved it.

Why Is Conflict Resolution an Essential Skill?

No matter what your job is, where you work, and who you work with, there will be conflicts. Researchers at Gartner named employee conflict resolution as a must-have skill for managers this year. They cited their 2023 survey findings that 57% of managers say they are fully responsible for managing and resolving team conflicts. In other words, learning to navigate conflicts is not really a choice in today's organizations. It's an imperative.

Conflict avoidance, even if that's your default conflict style, doesn't always serve you. As Amy Jen Su, author of *The Leader You Want to Be* writes:

Efforts to be “nice” can have pretty significant costs. You create relationships that are neither authentic nor constructive. Your health and self-esteem may suffer and you signal that you're a victim. And your organization loses out as you make compromises with the loudest person in the room, lose the diversity of thinking that's critical for innovation, or stop producing the best solutions.

On the flip side, productively and professionally engaging in conflict has lots of upsides. Here are just a few I shared in my article, [“Why We Should Be Disagreeing More at Work”](#):

- **Better work outcomes.** When you and your coworkers push one another to continually ask if there’s a better approach, that creative friction is likely to lead to new solutions. There’s rarely a fixed amount of value to be gained in a disagreement. If you and your colleague are arguing about the best way to roll out a new initiative — they want to launch in a single market first and you want to enter several at one time — you’ll be forced to explore the pros and cons of each approach and ideally find the best solutions.
- **Opportunities to learn and grow.** As uncomfortable as it may feel when someone challenges your ideas, it’s an opportunity to learn. By listening and incorporating feedback, you gain experience, try new things, and evolve as a manager. When a peer chews you out after an important presentation because you didn’t give her team credit for their work, the words may sting, but you’re more likely to think through everyone’s perspectives before preparing your next talk.
- **Improved relationships.** By working through conflict together, you’ll feel closer to the people around you and gain a better understanding of what matters to them and how they prefer to work. You’ll also set an important precedent: that it’s possible to have “good” fights and then move on.
- **Higher job satisfaction.** A [study](#) of American and Chinese employees in multinational organizations in China showed a correlation between the use of certain approaches to conflict management — ones in which employees pursue a win-win situation, care for others, and focus on common interests — and an employee’s happiness at work.
- **Psychological safety.** We want to work on and lead teams where people openly share their unique perspectives, debate about ideas and solutions, and communicate with a tone of respect that

builds trust. Research shows that teams that share diverse opinions make better decisions. Teams where people feel safe to disagree actually outperform other teams. Psychological safety builds stronger commitment, engagement, and accountability to produce results.

How to Approach the Conflict Resolution Process

When a conflict with a coworker comes up – a rude email shows up in your inbox or your coworker raises their voice at you during a meeting — it’s tempting to respond right away.

But when we immediately launch into resolving a conflict, even if we have good intentions, it doesn’t always go well. It’s far better to think through the best way to respond, rather than reacting.

Side note: This is often easier to do when you’re in a remote environment. Your colleague can’t catch you in the hallway or stop by your desk, forcing the conversation. You can often take your time to prepare, even write up some notes, before you and your colleague get back on Zoom or have a phone call. However, even if you work in the same location, take some time to prepare before having the conversation.

I recommend taking four steps to determine the best way to approach a conflict.

1. Try to see the situation from the other person’s point of view.

When we’re deep in a disagreement, we can get naturally narcissistic, focusing on ourselves and what we stand to lose or gain. So think about the other person and try to see the situation from their point of view. What do they care about? What’s causing them to behave the way they are? What do they want?

It's understandable if you assume the worst at first. Maybe even something like, "Well, Amara is acting this way because she's a passive aggressive jerk and has been since the day I've known her." Let that first thought go, and then ask yourself what's the most generous interpretation here? Maybe Amara is under a lot of pressure from her boss. Maybe she didn't get any sleep last night because her kid was sick.

This is generous to Amara, of course. But it's also strategic, because you're putting yourself in the best frame of mind to have a productive discussion and thinking through what Amara's interests are so that you can incorporate them into your conversations.

2. Pinpoint what the conflict is really about.

Often, when we have a conflict at work, we think it's personal, about our relationship. But more often than not conflicts at work are really about — or at least start with — other things. So review what's happened so far: what you've said and done, who else has been involved, where the disagreement started, and what it's related to.

It can be helpful to think about these four types of conflict (again from [*HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*](#)).

- **Task.** This is one of the most common sources of conflict and it's a disagreement over the goal of our work together, what we're trying to achieve. Take this example: Leaders at a tech company agree that one of their best-performing products needs a new feature, but they can't agree on how to measure its success. Marketing wants to expand the company's market share. Finance is focused on improving the business's margins. And the engineers care about integrating the latest technology.
- **Process.** This is a disagreement over the how, where you don't align on how to get the work done. Continuing with the example above, marketing is at odds with the engineers because they think they

should conduct customer focus groups while the engineers want to wait until they have an internally approved prototype.

- **Status.** These are disagreements over who gets to make the call on something, who has the authority or power to make a decision, or who deserves credit. In the tech company example, the SVP of engineering and the SVP of new product development disagree over which one of them should lead the group that's designing the new feature.
- **Relationship.** Of course, there are relationship conflicts, where one or both people feel disrespected or hurt — snapping at each other in meetings, sending snarky Slack messages. Often, a relationship conflict starts as another type of conflict. For example, the disagreement over when to run the focus groups (a process conflict) could escalate into bickering between the two teams that disrupts a broader initiative meeting.

Rarely do conflicts fall into just one of these categories. More often, there are multiple things going on, and many conflicts, no matter where they started, end up as relationship conflicts.

But if you can understand what the conflict is really about, it will be far easier to start to resolve it. So ask yourself: Are you disagreeing about the goal of a project or how to achieve it? Does your counterpart think they should be leading the initiative? Have you exchanged barbs? Or all of the above?

3. Determine your primary goal.

I'll admit that my default goal is often to prove that I'm right and the other person is wrong. But that's a terrible goal! Instead, think about what you truly want from the situation. Do you need to get the project done on time and on budget? Do you want to just end the conversation and move on with your life? Do you need to preserve your relationship with this person because you'll be working together again in the future?

You may want all of these things but think about your primary goal. What's most important? You get bonus points here if your goal overlaps with the other person's because a common objective is a great place to start to resolve a conflict.

4. Decide how to proceed.

The last step is to decide what to do, based on your work from the first three steps. Many times, simply going through the first three steps will solve the problem. Your attempts to see your counterpart's perspective may make you realize that the whole thing isn't such a big deal. Or you may realize your goal is to keep things running smoothly, so you decide to do nothing.

There are other options though. For one, you can choose to let it go. You don't say anything to your colleague, you let the comment pass, or you move on. We do this all the time, often without realizing it, and for many conflicts, it's a perfectly good approach. This is a good option when you don't have the energy or time to deal with the situation, or you suspect the other person is unwilling to have a constructive conversation. But only choose this option if you're sure you won't stew about the situation. That's not actually letting go!

Another option — and the one I recommend most often — is to address the conflict directly. This is where you have a productive discussion about what's happening and how to resolve it. This is a smart approach if you're concerned there will be lingering resentment if you don't address things, or if you want to get your relationship with the other person back on track. It's also useful if you've tried to let it go but the problem persists.

There's no set script for having the conversation. However, I will point out that choosing your words deliberately during that discussion is important. It's possible to say the "right" thing that will signal to your

counterpart that you're interested in collaborating and set you on the path toward a successful resolution. Or you might say something that sets your colleague off and derails the process. This article, "[Choose the Right Words in an Argument](#)" has some rules of thumb to follow.

Principles to Keep in Mind During Conflict Resolution

You'll be more effective in putting these conflict resolution strategies into action if you keep a few important principles in mind.

Your perspective is just one perspective.

It's easy to fixate on how you're seeing the situation and believe it's objectively "right" or even "just." This is a normal human thing to do. But just as you have your viewpoint on the situation so does the other person and they may be equally convinced they're right. It's far better to acknowledge that you likely see the conflict differently and that's OK. You and your colleague won't always see eye to eye and instead of trying to convince one another, try to rally around finding a path forward. I love the way that Dan Harris, host of the *10% Happier* podcast, describes this principle: Don't side with yourself.

Don't just listen. Actively listen.

You'll want to make your perspective heard but it's equally important to listen to the other person. If you hear what they're saying, you'll be better positioned to address the right issues — the ones that matter to them and you. This means not only allowing them to talk, but [actively listening](#) and demonstrating that you heard what they say and you understand their side.

Don't make it "me against them."

You don't want to get into a tug-of-war with the other person. Instead, imagine that there are three entities in the conflict: you, your colleague, and the problem you're trying to solve. You can use positive, collaborative visualizations, such as you and your coworker sitting on

the same side of a table, instead of combative ones to improve the odds of reaching a resolution.

Experiment to find what works.

As I said earlier, there is no set script for resolving conflicts. Instead, you have to go in with an open mind and a willingness to adjust your approach as you go. Think of yourself as a scientist who is trying to figure out the best way to solve a conflict. Then, keep refreshing your approaches, based on what you learn along the way, and be willing to abandon ones that aren't producing results. You might try something you haven't tried before, even something the other person might not expect to help bring the conversation in a new direction.

Regulate your emotions.

It's hard not to get worked up emotionally when you're deep in a conflict situation. After all, a disagreement can feel like a threat. You're afraid you're going to have to give up something — your point of view, the way you're used to doing something, the notion that you're right, or maybe even power — and your body therefore ramps up for a fight by triggering the sympathetic nervous system. You're not going to solve the underlying issues if you power through the conversation when you're in “fight, flight, or freeze” mode. Take a deep breath and focus on your body. You might repeat a mantra to yourself such as “This isn't about me,” “This will pass,” or “This is about the business.” Remember to be curious. Adopt a growth mindset — believe that you have something to learn for the situation. And don't forget the value of taking a break.

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Mastering all of these steps will not absolve you from having conflicts at work. But that isn't the goal. You may on occasion still react in a way that you regret. But by following the advice above, those occasions will be fewer and less painful — for you and your colleagues.

More Resources:

- [Why Leadership Teams Fail](#)
- [How to Handle a Disagreement on Your Team](#)
- [What Sets Genius Teams Apart](#)
- [The Conflict Resolution Skills Every Project Manager Needs](#)
- [How to Navigate Conflict with a Coworker](#)

This article was originally published online on October 21, 2024.



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