

Conflict Resolution

PLAYBOOK

Introduction

In any workplace, conflict is inevitable due to differing opinions, pressure, and varying work styles. As an HR professional, your role in managing and resolving conflicts is crucial for maintaining a healthy and productive work environment. This resource aims to provide you with a comprehensive guide to conflict resolution, offering insights into the context, a step-by-step process, and practical applications.

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Conflict and HR's role

Navigating workplace conflicts requires a keen understanding of the signs and origins of discord. Conflict in the workplace is inevitable and may manifest in various ways. Signs of conflict might include tension, communication breakdowns, decreased productivity, and increased absenteeism. However, it's important to note that not all conflict is bad. Conflict can also be productive and a healthy way to navigate differences among colleagues. Part of the challenge is figuring out which conflicts are harmful, and which are not. When conflict becomes personal and emotional, the conflict has moved on from the original cause and become internalized.

It's important to understand the impact of unresolved conflict on individuals and the organization as a whole.


People often cite personality clashes as a common cause of workplace conflict. However, this is not often the case. We put the blame on a colleague's character because of psychology and company politics, which leads us to draw incomplete conclusions.

The most common reason for conflict in the workplace is workplace stress. This could be due to a competitive work environment, differences in communication styles, misunderstandings or lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities, competing interests or goals, or conflicting perspectives or assumptions. Managers can prevent this by creating a collaborative environment where feedback is common.

In most cases, conflict is resolved by the employees or through the intervention of their managers. However, there are some situations where HR mediation is required.

HR may be called to step in if colleagues aren't seeing eye-to-eye and their manager is at a loss for what to do. They might also be asked to intervene if colleagues feel one of them is being given preferential treatment from their manager. HR will also be a neutral voice of reason if an employee feels they cannot give feedback directly to their manager.

HR's role in conflict resolution involves facilitating resolution in a conflict, as well as preventing future conflict through policy.

*Read through the list on the following page to get a **broader idea of what HR's role is** in a conflict situation and what it is not.* 

HR's role is to:

- ✓ Prevent conflicts from escalating and becoming significant issues that can affect the entire organization.
- ✓ Act as a mediator and facilitate communication between the conflicting parties.
- ✓ Provide a neutral and objective perspective on the situation to de-escalate conflicts and prevent them from turning into personal attacks.
- ✓ Identify the root cause of the conflict through a thorough investigation.
- ✓ Develop and implement policies and procedures that promote fairness and respect in the workplace.
- ✓ Be up-to-date with relevant laws and regulations and know when to involve a specialist in conflict resolution.

What is out of HR's scope:

- ✗ Taking sides in a conflict.
- ✗ Providing therapy or counseling to employees involved in the conflict.

SUMMARY

HR can foster a positive workplace culture by promoting open communication, respect, and collaboration. Establishing formal dispute resolution procedures, monitoring employee relations, and intervening promptly contribute to maintaining a healthy and productive work environment.

Ultimately, HR's proactive engagement in conflict resolution strategies is integral to fostering a harmonious workplace.



The Conflict Resolution Process // Five steps

Effective conflict resolution involves a structured process that encourages open communication and collaboration. Follow these five steps to guide you.

STEP 1: IDENTIFICATION

- Proactively identify potential conflicts through regular communication and feedback channels.
- Encourage open communication to surface issues before they escalate.

STEP 2: INVESTIGATION

- Gather information from all parties involved to determine the next steps. In a serious matter, you must maintain confidentiality and take an appropriate course of action which will likely involve consulting an attorney or specialist. You would not proceed with mediation in a serious matter.
- Consider the context, individual perspectives, and underlying issues.
- Determine if the conflict is personal or work related.

STEP 3: MEDIATION

- Bring the conflicting parties together in a neutral and private setting.
- Encourage active listening to understand each party's viewpoint and to use “I” statements. For example, someone might say, “I feel he’s not listening to me,” rather than “He never listens.”
- Facilitate open dialogue to explore potential solutions.

STEP 4: SOLUTION GENERATION

- Collaborate with the involved parties to brainstorm possible solutions.
- Prioritize solutions based on feasibility, impact, and fairness.
- Aim for a win-win outcome where both parties feel satisfied.

STEP 5: IMPLEMENTATION

- Develop an action plan outlining the agreed-upon solutions. All parties need to agree on the next steps.
- Monitor the progress of the implemented solutions. For example, you can schedule check-in meetings with the parties or their manager.
- Provide ongoing support and follow-up.

The Conflict Resolution Process // Best practices

Here are some best practices as you apply the process and what to do if the conflict is not resolved. In applying the process, you'll need to rely on your facilitation skills, solid documentation, and mediation techniques.

- A // Facilitation skills**
 - Remain neutral and unbiased.
 - Guide the conversation without imposing solutions.
 - Foster a collaborative atmosphere.
- B // Documentation**
 - Maintain thorough records of discussions and agreements.
 - Ensure confidentiality while adhering to legal requirements.
- C // Mediation techniques**
 - Use mediation when direct communication is challenging.
 - Ensure both parties have an opportunity to speak and be heard.

What if the conflict is not resolved? What to do when outside or additional help is required? It's best to address problems at a local level as quickly as possible. However, in some cases, you'll need external help from a mediator, arbitrator, or attorney. These situations include when:

- Conflict relates to potential legal issues, such as in cases of discrimination or harassment.
- Issues are recurring.
- Conflict becomes abusive or resembles bullying.
- The environment is toxic, and it would be best to take employees offsite so the office doesn't trigger a negative response.
- HR is not trained for the type of conflict they're dealing with.

KEEP IN MIND

Conflict resolution is an ongoing process that requires dedication, empathy, and effective communication. As an HR professional, your commitment to resolving conflicts positively contributes to a harmonious and productive workplace.

Remember, **each conflict is an opportunity for growth and improvement**, both at an individual and organizational level.

Embrace the challenges, apply the conflict resolution process diligently, and strive for win-win outcomes that promote a thriving work environment.



Applying the Process // A practical case



This case illustrates how an HR professional, **Sarah**, applies the five-step conflict resolution process in her work.

STEP 1: IDENTIFICATION

Imagine an HR professional, Sarah, who regularly conducts team check-ins and encourages open communication within the company. During one of these sessions, an employee, Alex, expresses concerns about the distribution of project responsibilities within the team. Sarah proactively identifies this as a potential conflict and encourages Alex to share more details.

STEP 2: INVESTIGATION

Sarah takes the initiative to gather information from Alex as well as other team members involved. She considers the context of the project, individual perspectives, and any underlying issues contributing to the conflict. Through her investigation, Sarah determines that the conflict is primarily work related, centered around unequal distribution of tasks and perceptions of unfairness.

STEP 3: MEDIATION

To address the conflict, Sarah arranges a private meeting with Alex and the team members affected. In a neutral setting, she facilitates a discussion, encouraging active listening among the parties. Sarah ensures that each person has the opportunity to express their viewpoint and explores the root causes of the perceived unfairness.

STEP 4: SOLUTION GENERATION

Collaborating with the conflicting parties, Sarah leads a brainstorming session to generate potential solutions. The team discusses various ways to redistribute tasks more equitably, considering feasibility, impact, and fairness. Sarah emphasizes the importance of achieving a win-win outcome, where both Alex and the team members feel satisfied with the proposed solutions.

STEP 5: IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the agreed-upon solutions, Sarah works with the team to develop a detailed action plan. This plan outlines the steps to be taken to address the conflict, including adjustments to project responsibilities. Sarah monitors the progress of the implemented solutions, providing ongoing support to ensure a smooth transition. She conducts follow-up sessions to gauge the team's satisfaction and address any emerging concerns, fostering a positive and collaborative work environment.