

DION LEADERSHIP

Conquering Conflict

4 Steps for Engaging in Healthy Conflict



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The Problem

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We have all experienced those awkward situations. Two executives shouting behind closed doors. A meeting that erupts into chaos after one attendee walks out in frustration. The team that perpetually can't get along. And the more subtle, but no less disruptive, avoidance techniques of countless people who *should* work together but choose not to. Unchecked workplace conflict can decrease productivity, erode team dynamics, lower employee morale, impair decision-making, and increase costs, ultimately harming both individual well-being and organizational success. However, when effectively managed, workplace conflict can build deeply trusting bonds between individuals that create dynamic and engaging teams, lead to quicker and better decisions, and serve as the backbone of a healthy, top-workplace organizational culture.

Let's explore some practical strategies for handling conflict, so you can transform conflict from your organization's Achilles' heel to a strategic advantage.

Understanding Workplace Conflict

Conflict is the condition in which people's concerns appear to be incompatible. A concern can be anything that someone cares about or has a stake in. Oftentimes, seemingly incompatible concerns are easily clarified, discussed, and immediately resolved. It will simply feel like working, not a conflict at all. However, sometimes opposing concerns aren't resolved quickly but devolve into faulty assumptions and personal attacks. They fester, turning into a conflict situation for the people involved, and may spill out to the teams around them, impacting the whole organization.

Often, a lack of trust may escalate a conflict to an unhealthy level. When this occurs, it's no longer about the concern itself. It has a negative, multiplying, and rippling effect that impacts future interactions and other topics.

A Positive Approach to Conflict

Just as conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction, it is an unavoidable condition of any workplace occupied by people. Accepting conflict as normal allows us to approach it constructively. Conflict itself is neutral—it's how we handle it that will determine if the outcome is a positive or negative one. Conflict can lead to growth and positive change. It can improve problem-solving skills and build stronger relationships.

“When there is trust, conflict becomes nothing but the pursuit of truth, an attempt to find the best possible answer.”

— Patrick Lencioni,
The Advantage



Common Causes of Conflict

- Differing needs, goals, or values
- Miscommunication
- Personality clashes
- Power struggles and warring egos
- Stress and heavy workloads

Types of Workplace Conflict

Interpersonal Conflicts

Example: Two colleagues, Alex and Jamie, have clashing personalities. Alex prefers a structured, detail-oriented approach to tasks, while Jamie is more flexible and spontaneous. Their different working styles lead to frequent misunderstandings and disagreements, creating tension in the team.

Task-Based Conflicts

Example: A project team is divided over the best approach to meet a tight deadline. Some members believe they should focus on quick, short-term solutions, while others argue for a more comprehensive, long-term strategy. This disagreement over how to proceed causes delays and frustration among team members.

Role Conflicts

Example: Sarah and Juan are given responsibilities that overlap in a new project. Without a clear delineation of roles, they both try to take charge, leading to confusion, duplicated efforts, and friction between them as they struggle to assert their authority.

Resource Conflicts

Example: The marketing and sales departments are both vying for a limited budget to launch their respective initiatives. The competition for financial resources leads to disputes between the department heads, creating a hostile environment and slowing down the decision-making process.

Value-Based Conflicts

Example: Aisha prioritizes work-life balance and prefers to leave the office on time to spend evenings with her family. Her manager, John, believes in putting in extra hours to achieve company goals. John's expectations for overtime work clash with Emma's personal values, causing resentment and potential burnout.



The Business Impact of Conflict

- U.S. employees spend approximately 2.8 hours each week involved in conflict. This amounts to a productivity cost of approximately \$359 billion (**CPP, Inc.**).
- Nearly two-thirds of U.S. workers have experienced incivility at work in the last month (**SHRM**).
- Workers who rate their workplace as “uncivil” are three times more likely to be unsatisfied with their job and twice as likely to leave their job in the next year (**SHRM**).

Sources: *Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Thrive*, CPP, Inc.
SHRM Civility Index

The Healthy Conflict Conversation Model

The Dion Leadership team created the Healthy Conflict Conversation Model from conflict resolution research and successful methods practiced by our clients. The model is a process that serves as a planning tool and facilitates healthy interactions with others when involved in a conflict. When all four steps are followed with an open mind and good intentions, the results can profoundly change relationships, remove impasses in decision-making, and build trusting bonds to quickly process future disagreements.

This model:

- Applies no matter your personal style
- Assists in managing the conflict effectively
- Focuses on preserving relationships



How It Works

The **Situation** phase requires you to analyze what prompted the conflict. Reflection is critical to a successful outcome. The **Mindset** phase involves an effort to understand what's driving you in this conflict, including making sure your side of the story is grounded in reality.

The next phase is **Behavior**, or the action you take regarding the conflict. In the healthy conflict model, this phase involves building trust through dialogue. And the last phase is the **Outcome**, when you reach a point where you can move forward from the conflict.

Notice the arrow that goes from the final step back to the initial situation. Complex conflicts may require you to repeat the process if the outcome turns out not to resolve the conflict adequately or if new aspects of the conflict pop up. By sticking to this plan, however, you put yourself in a position to eventually reach a satisfactory outcome.

Applying the Healthy Conflict Conversation Model



Analyze the Situation

To start the process of addressing conflict, the situation requires analysis. Start by seeking answers to the following questions that help you sort out your side of the story:

- **What is going on?**
- **Who is involved?**
- **What impact is it having on work?**
- **What impact is it having on you?**



Do a Reality Check

This may be the most important phase of the model, as the reality that you validate in this phase will drive the rest of process.

When you do a reality check, you hold your side of the story up to scrutiny to ensure it is supported by the facts. You also ensure that you are confronting the appropriate issue and are not led to draw conclusions about people or situations that are based on judgments, emotions, or assumptions.

The following questions can guide your reality check:

- **What do you know to be true?**
- **What additional information do you need?**
- **Are you reacting with emotion and judgment or reason and empathy?**
- **For what parts of this situation are you accountable?**
- **What conclusions can you make?**

Utilizing Emotional Intelligence in Conflict Resolution

Emotional intelligence (EI) involves recognizing, understanding, and managing our emotions as well as recognizing and understanding the emotions of the people around us. In conflict resolution, EI helps in the following ways:

- 1. Self-Awareness** is about understanding your emotional triggers during conflicts and recognizing when frustration, defensiveness, or anger arises.
- 2. Self-Management** happens when you regulate your emotions—for example, when you stay calm and composed even when tensions escalate or avoid impulsive reactions that may worsen the situation.
- 3. Empathy** is your ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes and understand their feelings and perspectives. Empathy fosters better communication and mutual understanding.
- 4. Social Intelligence** allows you to navigate group dynamics. When you are attuned to the emotions of everyone involved, you are able to adapt your approach based on the context and people present.
- 5. Building Trust** is a byproduct of showing respect, engaging in active listening, and demonstrating genuine concern for others, all of which are enabled by EI. Trust is essential for resolving conflicts collaboratively.



Build Trust Through Dialogue

Productive dialogue is an essential element of an effort to address a conflict situation. How that dialogue plays out is a product of how it is planned and approached and whether it builds trust or erodes it. At the start of the conflict situation, trust may be low.

Several aspects of productive dialogue can be utilized to start building trust:

- **Share your facts/describe the gap.**
- **Ask for others' facts.**
- **Really listen.**
- **Seek to understand.**
- **Seek common ground.**
- **Be focused but flexible.**



Move Forward

A productive dialogue will move your conflict toward an outcome that allows everyone to move forward. This phase is crucial, because if you haven't clarified and gained agreement on conclusions and decisions resulting from the conflict conversation, you may encounter additional conflict down the road. Ensuring a positive outcome, then, requires specific actions.

To move forward, you will need to:

- **Agree how you will proceed.** Make sure both sides understand any next steps, changes, agreements, or decisions that came out of your conversation and that roles and responsibilities are clear.
- **Document any agreements and decisions.**
- **Explore barriers and create strategies to overcome them.** Anticipate what could go wrong, what could make the conflict flare up, and what objections or problems you may encounter so you can be ready to handle them.
- **Monitor, follow up, and revisit the situation as needed to ensure that your resolution is working for everyone involved.**



Good Conflict and Genius Teams

In the recent *Harvard Business Review* article **“What Sets Genius Teams Apart,”** Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg highlights the unique dynamics and practices that set these exceptional teams apart from other good, high-functioning teams.

One key trait is the emphasis on trust and vulnerability among team members—a cornerstone of **Patrick Lencioni’s** team model. Without trust, teams struggle with another key piece of Lencioni’s Five Dysfunctions pyramid: fear of conflict.

Wedell-Wedellsborg observes, “Genius teams are different in that they don’t shy away from either task or relationship conflict. Their level of task conflict is higher than in other executive teams, because these discomforting moments motivate them and inspire new ideas.”

Get Started Using the Healthy Conflict Conversation Model

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Analyze the Situation

OBJECTIVE: Understand the context and identify the conflict's root cause.

KEY ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES:

- Gather Information: Collect relevant facts. Who is involved? What triggered the conflict?
- Assess Impact: Consider the consequences of unresolved conflict on individuals, teams, and the organization.
- Clarify Goals: Define what you want to achieve through the conversation.

2

Do a Reality Check

OBJECTIVE: Challenge assumptions and gain clarity.

KEY ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES:

- Separate Facts from Interpretations: Distinguish between observable facts and personal interpretations.
- Question Assumptions: Ask yourself and others if assumptions are accurate.
- Stay Open-Minded: Be willing to adjust your perspective based on new information.

3

Build Trust Through Dialogue

OBJECTIVE: Create an environment where open communication can occur.

KEY ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES:

- Listen Actively: Give your full attention. Show empathy and seek to understand the other person's viewpoint.
- Express Your Own Perspective: Share your feelings and thoughts without blame.
- Avoid Defensiveness: Be receptive to feedback and avoid becoming defensive.
- Find Common Ground: Identify shared interests or goals.

4

Move Forward

OBJECTIVE: Generate solutions and agree on next steps.

KEY ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES:

- Brainstorm Solutions: Collaborate on potential ways to resolve the conflict.
- Evaluate Options: Consider the pros and cons of each solution.
- Choose a Path: Select the best approach together.
- Agree on Action Steps: Define specific actions, responsibilities, and deadlines.

Take Action

Effective conflict management benefits individuals, teams, and organizations. The most stressful part of a conflict is having it live in your head while you stress over the anticipation of what might happen next.

Your Planning Guide

Use this e-book to plan out your conversation and engage the other person in a confident and open manner. Use the steps in the Healthy Conflict Conversation model, and you will likely find that there is more common ground than you thought. The result may be not only a more creative alternative that works for both of you, but also a healthier relationship.



HEALTHY CONFLICT CONVERSATION NOTES

Analyze the Situation	
Do a Reality Check	
Build Trust Through Dialogue	
Move Forward	

Would You Like Your Employees to Start Every Day Excited and End Every Day Accomplished?

- Leadership Coaching
- Leadership Development and Management Training
- Team Development
- Organizational Development and Talent Assessment

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