Guide on

Handling Challenging scenarios in the Workplace

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1. Introduction

There will always be challenging scenarios, such as disagreements or problems in the workplace. Maybe you have a different opinion about how to do your work or a miscommunication with a colleague. These scenarios rarely resolve by themselves, and it is not uncommon to see a minor issue escalate into a significant problem if it is not addressed early on.

Unresolved scenarios can result in conflict, which in turn can result in negative feelings and behaviours that can significantly affect individuals, teams, and organisations. Although steps should be taken to prevent conflict from arising, it is possible to turn conflict into something positive if it is well-managed and resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Conflict can challenge assumptions and increase cooperation and innovation.

It is important to understand the different techniques to handle conflict so you can deal with challenging conversations, maintain good relationships, increase productivity, and achieve common goals.

2. What is Conflict?

Conflicts are generally defined as relational disputes between two or more parties - "the clashing of opposed principles" according to the Oxford Dictionary.

Conflict is when there are differing opinions and actions that result in serious disagreement, argument, or dispute. It can arise from a clash of perceptions, goals, personalities, or values that if unaddressed or unresolved, can cause an emotional build-up. Conflict typically extends over some time. However, it can be caused by a one-off event, such as an unexpected task or deadline. It also does not just happen between two individuals – several other types of conflict can occur.

- **Intrapersonal conflict** - Conflict someone has with themselves in their mind, which might involve conflicting thoughts, emotions, and values.
- **Interpersonal conflict** - Conflict between two people.
- **Intragroup conflict** - Conflict between individuals within a team.
- **Intergroup conflict** - Conflict between different teams in an organisation.

3. What causes conflict?

Sources of conflict can be caused by individual, environmental, work-based, or organisational factors. These sources can overlap.

Individual sources

- Different work styles and performance levels.
- Believe you are being treated unfairly.
- Unhealthy competition (with yourself and others).
- Personal stress at home.
- Physical health (poor nutrition or lack of sleep can cause you to become moody and irritable).

Environmental or external sources

- Poor working conditions (the workplace is noisy or crowded).
- A recession (forcing cutbacks and downsizing that might increase workloads or increase competition between colleagues).

Work-based or organisational sources

- Changes in organisational systems and processes.
- Lack of autonomy (being micromanaged).
- Bullying and harassment in the workplace.
- Unrealistic expectations (short deadlines that you cannot meet).
- Competition over limited resources, such as money, equipment.
- Power struggles or poor management (lack of direction or support).
- Miscommunication or lack of communication.
- Unclear job roles or inadequate training.

4. Stages of Conflict

There are five stages of conflict. Recognising the different stages of conflict is an integral part of preventing and resolving conflict. It gives you a different perspective and helps you to manage your emotions and actions, as well as anticipate the emotions and actions of others.

1. **Latent conflict:** This stage is where factors that could create conflict are present, but people are not yet aware of them. For example, you start to work on a project with a new colleague. They like to micromanage every detail, but you like to focus on the overall view.

2. **Perceived conflict:** This stage is where people become aware of the conflict. For example, you notice that your colleague focuses on every minor detail and seems to miss the big picture.

3. **Felt conflict:** When one or more people feel tension, stress or anxiety caused by the conflict. For example, you start to feel frustrated that your colleague constantly micromanages your joint tasks.

4. **Manifest conflict:** When people engage in open conflict. For example, you confront your colleague about their micromanaging. They blame their actions on you, claiming it is necessary because of your lack of contribution.

5. **Conflict aftermath:** This stage is the outcome of the conflict where there is a resolution to or dismissal of the problem. The consequence can either be a positive or negative result. A positive resolution could be where both you and your colleague try to understand each other's perspective. You both try to see what is good about each other's approach and manage to work together, accommodating the different styles. Or maybe it was handled poorly, and now you do not speak to each other.

5. Recognising conflict

There are many ways that you can recognise tension or conflict in the felt and manifest stages both in yourself and in others. Some of these may include:

- Argumentative or challenging comments.
- Withdrawn, lack of contribution or avoidance.
- Absence and lower productivity.
- Short-tempered, overly critical, or regularly complaining.
- Lack of trust.
- Negative nonverbal cues, such as avoiding eye contact, aggressive tone, folded arms.

6. Preventing Conflict

Conflict generally escalates when our emotions or others' emotions run high. Recognising when something is bothering you and managing those emotions, as well as the emotions of others, is called **emotional intelligence (EI)**, which is an essential part of both preventing and managing conflict.

Those that apply all **four areas** of EI can often:

- Have stronger leadership skills.
- Manage stress and conflict more effectively have more meaningful relationships both inside and outside the workplace.

	Recognition	Regulation
Personal Competence	**Self-Awareness** • Self-confidence • Awareness of your emotional state • Recognizing how your behavior impacts others • Paying attention to how others influence your emotional state	**Self-Management** • Keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check • Acting in congruence with your values • Handling change flexibly • Pursuing goals and opportunities despite obstacles and setbacks
Social Competence	**Social Awareness** • Picking up on the mood in the room • Caring what others are going through • Hearing what the other person is "really" saying	**Relationship Management** • Getting along well with others • Handling conflict effectively • Clearly expressing ideas/information • Using sensitivity to another person's feeling (empathy) to manage interactions successfully

Source: https://positivepsychology.com/emotional-intelligence-tests/

Self-awareness

Self-awareness means recognising feelings and emotions within yourself and identifying why you are feeling that way. You can work on becoming more self-aware by:

- Recognising what situations cause you to have negative feelings, such as talking with a particular colleague.
- Acknowledging how those negative feelings impact your conversations or relationships with others.
- Understanding your strengths and limitations.

Social awareness

Social awareness means recognising when people are in different emotional states and modifying how you interact with them to communicate more effectively. One of the main ways you can recognise how someone is feeling or understand them better is to actively listen. This requires you to stop doing other things, spend time with a person and ask them questions. Social awareness is also about understanding how to act in various social situations and expressing empathy to better connect with people. Showing empathy is particularly important if there is conflict. It can show the other person that you care about their point of view even if you do not necessarily agree.

Self-management

Self-management means managing your emotions, so they do not negatively affect your conversations or relationships. You can work on self-management by:

- Stopping to think before making an emotional response.
- Understanding that feelings are temporary.
- Finding activities to help with stress-relief (exercise, eating healthily, hobbies).
- Talking to someone about how you are feeling and asking for advice to avoid emotional build-up.

Relationship management

When you become aware of how others feel, then you can start to work on managing the relationship. This can be done through influencing, developing, collaborating, or inspiring people to respond in a particular way. For example, if you want to calm someone down, you can use persuasion to help them relax. Good communication is a necessary part of relationship management skills.

Self-Awareness audit

Reflect on each of the following statements:	**Yes**	**No**
1. I reflect and think about my own personal reaction to conflict situations		
2. I actively control my levels of pressure and stress		
3. I respect the views of others, even if I do not agree with them		
4. I am positive in my relationships with others at work		
5. I plan and prepare well for 'difficult' conversations		
6. I balance my emotional reactions with my logical reactions		
7. I listen well to understand the viewpoint of others		
8. I use silence to help other people reflect on what they have just said		
9. I ask open questions to explore the viewpoint of others in more detail		
10. I bring up issues that are bothering me with the other person		
11. I respectfully challenge the views and perceptions of others		
12. I use confident, assured body language in all my interactions		
What are your thoughts and reactions on the statements above?		
Where are your strengths?		
Where could you improve?		
What is within your control and what one thing could you do differently today?		
Do any of the following create conflict for you? • Frustrations • Irritations • A different way of working • Varied approaches • Outright challenge		

7. Emotions

It is not always easy to recognise or manage your emotions. For example, you might be under a lot of pressure between your personal and professional responsibilities, or experience communication issues within your team. Maybe you do not get along well with a colleague you have to work closely with. These types of situations can make it especially hard to control your emotions.

Being frustrated and upset are natural human emotions. Controlling your emotions in the heat of the moment can be a challenging thing to do. There are some techniques to help you analyse stressful events and manage how you respond to them.

How do we distinguish between facts and feelings and can we see a situation from a different perspective by re-framing, seeking logical explanations and balancing our emotions?

Feelings vs. facts		
Name:	Identify what you are feeling.	I feel disrespected when this person challenges my ideas.
Claim:	Acknowledge and accept you are feeling this way.	It is okay to feel this way.
Reframe:	The situation based on logic and evidence.	Maybe the person is trying to find out more information or is looking at this in a more analytical way than I am.
Tame:	Balance the emotional with the rational. See the situation through this lens.	I will talk to the person after the meeting to find out more about their perspective and see if I can use their viewpoint to improve my thinking.

8. Building stronger relationships

The two other areas of emotional intelligence are about how you are socially with others: social awareness and relationship management. Developing these areas will help you gain the trust and respect of others and build stronger relationships. This can help you reduce tension and better manage challenging situations.

There are ways you can build trust and respect to reduce the chances of conflict arising.

1. **Understand people on a deeper level**

Have you ever helped someone because you felt you would want help if you were in their position? Then they did not respond with the appreciation you were expecting? Expecting a response based on how you would react is an example of projecting your intentions on someone. The result of not getting the response or answer you were hoping for can make you feel rejected and stop you from helping. However, if you try to understand people on a deeper level instead of assuming you understand, the more likely you will achieve a positive outcome.

One of the ways you can better understand someone is to listen. Listening is particularly important if someone is upset. Let them finish talking and listen to their concerns even if you disagree with them. Listening helps you figure out why they are upset and find ways to help them manage their emotions.

2. **Personal integrity**

You can do many nice things for others, but if you do not do it with integrity, trust and respect cannot be achieved. Integrity involves being honest but also being true to your words. You can show integrity by meeting or exceeding expectations and being loyal to others. Integrity is also about treating people the same. For example, on your lunch break, you say negative things about a colleague to another colleague. This action indirectly tells that person that you are kind to someone's face but will talk behind their back.

3. **Stick to your commitments**

Failing to keep your promises or commitments can negatively affect trust and respect. Make a habit of keeping your promises so that people will trust you. Only when you establish trust can relationships grow.

4. **Set clear expectations and goals**

When you are in a new situation, you begin to judge other people and the situation based on your expectations. When your expectations are not met, it can create negative emotions towards others. To avoid misunderstandings and diminishing trust, set clear expectations and goals from the start so that you and everyone else have the same understanding.

5. **Do small things for people**

Even just one small act of kindness can make a favourable impression with a person. For example, bringing a colleague a cup of tea or helping them prepare for a presentation.

6. **Apologising**

If you do something wrong, sincerely apologise. You might think this makes you look weak or feel vulnerable. However, it shows a lot about your character if you openly, honestly, and genuinely apologise to someone for doing something wrong.

Sometimes just apologising is enough to resolve conflict before it reaches the felt or manifest stage.

9. Avoiding Miscommunication

Prepare in advance of meetings and discussions using an agenda. Follow up in writing to confirm agreed actions, timeframes, and expectations.

Seek feedback and arrange regular follow-up and updates.

Mirroring

Copying others' body language, tone or facial expressions is known as mirroring. Mirroring is another way of telling the person that you share the same values and emotions. If you are already comfortable and engaged with someone, you might unconsciously mirror one another. However, mirroring can be conscious as well, for example, to help build rapport with someone or help them feel more comfortable.

Humour

In certain situations, it might be beneficial to incorporate some humour. Humour can:

- help you and the other person bond over laughter.
- ease tension and make you seem less defensive.
- put issues into perspective and help people work towards a resolution.

If you use humour during the felt stage, it could prevent conflict from manifesting. For serious conflicts, humour might not be appropriate. Having high emotional intelligence will help you assess the person and the situation to see if humour could help.

10. Managing Conflict

Even if you incorporate preventative measures, sometimes conflict can still occur. For example, conflict can arise from policy changes at work that are not communicated to all the employees.

If conflict does arise, understanding how to manage and resolve conflict can help you turn the problem into an opportunity while still maintaining relationships.

Conflict management styles

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) describes five different behaviours people demonstrate during conflict. These five behaviours measure a person's level of cooperativeness and assertiveness. Cooperativeness is how much effort is put into satisfying others' needs and concerns. Assertiveness is how much effort is put into satisfying your own needs and concerns.

Competing

If you adopt a competing approach in conflict, you are assertive but uncooperative. You are direct about what you want, but you have little concern for what the other person wants. In other words, you are trying to win regardless of the impact on others.

Collaborating

Collaboration is the ideal behaviour to have when in conflict. Both people are assertive about what they need and cooperative to help meet the other person's needs. Collaboration can be challenging to achieve if both parties are in total disagreement. You can help to resolve this by trying to uncover the reason behind the conflict and find ways to work together, so both parties win. This approach allows for development and growth in the organisation because challenging each other's information, thoughts and ideas can result in innovation.

Avoiding

An avoiding approach is both unassertive (passive) and uncooperative. You either do not speak up for what you want or say it passively, and you do not try to meet the needs of the other person. You try to avoid dealing with conflict and instead put off the issue until later or wait for it to settle down on its own.

Accommodating

Accommodating means you are unassertive and cooperative. You are overly helpful towards others' needs, but do not speak up or are not direct about your own ideas or needs. You like to make other people happy even if you lose in the end.

Compromising

Compromising is the middle ground, where there is a moderate level of assertive and cooperative behaviour. Both parties speak up about what they need while recognising the other person's needs, but it is not as effective as collaborating. Here both parties give up some of their needs to achieve a small win.

11. Problem-solving to achieve a win-win solution

Be problem-focused rather than people-focused

Take the person out of the issue and focus on the problem and how to fix it. Using a problem-focused approach helps to prevent the situation from becoming personal by blaming the other person for the issue.

Create multiple possible solutions

Get creative and think about some other ways to resolve the issue. Work together and brainstorm to come up with a variety of possible solutions that could work for all the people involved. Then prioritise the different options based on acceptance.

Use appropriate language

When making a counterargument, use appropriate language to help maintain the relationship.

Ensure acceptance

Once everyone has come to a solution, make sure it is fair and that everyone agrees to it. This is particularly important when there are more than two people involved. Just because someone has not said anything, does not mean they accept the decision. Failing to address their disapproval right away can cause further conflict later.

Elements of positive conflict resolution

In summary, if you find yourself experiencing conflict, there are a few factors that can help achieve a positive resolution.

Trust and respect

There is trust and respect between people, for example, there is no shouting or accusatory language or name-calling, and people listen to each other.

Problem-focused

Everyone is problem-focused and willing to work towards a solution.

Open-minded

Everyone is open-minded to alternative opinions and solutions. Two stubborn people that want it their way will not help to resolve the conflict.

Win-win

Everyone is committed to achieving a win-win situation. People involved should focus not only on finding a solution but finding something that works for everyone and the agreement should not be at the expense of another person.

12. Further Information

For further information, please take time to review our HR webpage, including our HR policies to assist with any queries and for contact details if you need to follow-up with us directly.