

5 STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE WORKPLACE



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Catherine CoteStaff

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Any scenario in which you live, work, and collaborate with others is susceptible to conflict. Because workplaces are made up of employees with different backgrounds, personalities, opinions, and daily lives, discord is bound to occur. To navigate it, it's crucial to understand why it arises and your options for resolving it.

Common reasons for workplace conflict include:

- Misunderstandings or poor [communication skills](#)
- Differing opinions, viewpoints, or personalities
- [Biases or stereotypes](#)
- Variations in learning or processing styles
- Perceptions of unfairness

Although conflict is common, many don't feel comfortable handling it—especially with colleagues. As a business leader, you'll likely clash with other managers and need to help your team work through disputes.

Here's why conflict resolution is important and five strategies for approaching it.

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WHY IS ADDRESSING WORKPLACE CONFLICT IMPORTANT?

Pretending conflict doesn't exist doesn't make it go away. Ignoring issues can lead to missed deadlines, festering resentment, and unsuccessful initiatives.

Yet, according to [coaching and training firm Bravely \(pdf\)](#), 53 percent of employees handle “toxic” situations by avoiding them. Worse still, averting a difficult conversation can cost an organization \$7,500 and more than seven workdays.

That adds up quickly: American businesses lose [\\$359 billion yearly](#) due to the impact of unresolved conflict.

As a leader, you [have a responsibility](#) to foster healthy conflict resolution and create a safe, productive work environment for employees.

“Some rights, such as the right to safe working conditions or the right against sexual harassment, are fundamental to the employment relationship,” says Harvard Business School Professor Nien-hê Hsieh in the course [Leadership, Ethics, and Corporate Accountability](#). “These rights are things that employees should be entitled to no matter what. They’re often written into the law, but even when they aren’t, they’re central to the ethical treatment of others, which involves respecting the inherent dignity and intrinsic worth of each individual.”

Effectively resolving disputes as they arise benefits your employees’ well-being and your company’s financial health. The first step is learning about five conflict resolution strategies at your disposal.

Related: [How to Navigate Difficult Conversations with Employees](#)

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While there are several approaches to conflict, some can be more effective than others. The [Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model](#)—developed by Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas and Dr. Ralph H. Kilmann—outlines five strategies for conflict resolution:

1. Avoiding
2. Competing
3. Accommodating
4. Compromising
5. Collaborating

These fall on a graph, with assertiveness on the y-axis and cooperativeness on the x-axis. In the Thomas-Kilmann model, “assertiveness” refers to the extent to which you try to reach your own goal, and “cooperativeness” is the extent to which you try to satisfy the other party’s goal.

Alternatively, you can think of these axis labels as the “importance of my goal” and the “importance of this relationship.” If your assertiveness is high, you aim to achieve your own goal. If your cooperativeness is high, you strive to help the other person reach theirs to maintain the relationship.

Here’s a breakdown of the five strategies and when to use each.

1. Avoiding

Avoiding is a strategy best suited for situations in which the relationship’s importance and goal are both low.

While you’re unlikely to encounter these scenarios at work, they may occur in daily life. For instance, imagine you’re on a public bus and the passenger next to you is loudly playing music. You’ll likely never bump into that person again, and your goal of a pleasant bus ride isn’t extremely pressing. Avoiding conflict by ignoring the music is a valid option.

In workplace conflicts—where your goals are typically important and you care about maintaining a lasting relationship with colleagues—avoidance can be detrimental.

Remember: Some situations require avoiding conflict, but you’re unlikely to encounter them in the workplace.

2. Competing

Competing is another strategy that, while not often suited for workplace conflict, can be useful in some situations.

This conflict style is for scenarios in which you place high importance on your goal and low importance on your relationships with others. It’s high in assertiveness and low in cooperation.

You may choose a competing style in a crisis. For instance, if someone is unconscious and people are arguing about what to do, asserting yourself and taking charge can help the person get medical attention quicker.

You can also use it when standing up for yourself and in instances where you feel unsafe. In those cases, asserting yourself and reaching safety is more critical than your relationships with others.

When using a competing style in situations where your relationships do matter (for instance, with a colleague), you risk impeding trust—along with collaboration, creativity, and productivity.

3. Accommodating

The third conflict resolution strategy is accommodation, in which you acquiesce to the other party's needs. Use accommodating in instances where the relationship matters more than your goal.

For example, if you pitch an idea for a future project in a meeting, and one of your colleagues says they believe it will have a negative impact, you could resolve the conflict by rescinding your original thought.

This is useful if the other person is angry or hostile or you don't have a strong opinion on the matter. It immediately deescalates conflict by removing your goal from the equation.

While accommodation has its place within organizational settings, question whether you use it to avoid conflict. If someone disagrees with you, simply acquiescing can snuff out opportunities for [innovation and creative problem-solving](#).

As a leader, notice whether your employees frequently fall back on accommodation. If the setting is safe, encouraging healthy debate can lead to greater collaboration.

Related: [How to Create a Culture of Ethics and Accountability in the Workplace](#)

4. Compromising

Compromising is a conflict resolution strategy in which you and the other party willingly forfeit some of your needs to reach an agreement. It's known as a "lose-lose" strategy, since neither of you achieve your full goal.

This strategy works well when your care for your goal and the relationship are both moderate. You value the relationship, but not so much that you abandon your goal, like in accommodation.

For example, maybe you and a peer express interest in leading an upcoming project. You could compromise by co-leading it or deciding one of you leads this one and the other the next one.

Compromising requires big-picture thinking and swallowing your pride, knowing you won't get all your needs fulfilled. The benefits are that you and the other party value your relationship and make sacrifices to reach a mutually beneficial resolution.

5. Collaborating

Where compromise is a lose-lose strategy, collaboration is a win-win. In instances of collaboration, your goal and the relationship are equally important, motivating both you and the other party to work together to find an outcome that meets all needs.

An example of a situation where collaboration is necessary is if one of your employees isn't performing well in their role—to the point that they're negatively impacting the business. While maintaining a strong, positive relationship is important, so is finding a solution to their poor performance. Framing the conflict as a collaboration can open doors to help each other discover its cause and what you can do to improve performance and the business's health.

Collaboration is ideal for most workplace conflicts. Goals are important, but so is maintaining positive relationships with co-workers. Promote collaboration whenever possible to [find creative solutions to problems](#). If you can't generate a win-win idea, you can always fall back on compromise.



CONSIDERING YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS A LEADER

As a leader, not only must you address your own conflicts but help your employees work through theirs. When doing so, remember your responsibilities to your employees—whether ethical, legal, or economic.

[Leadership, Ethics, and Corporate Accountability](#) groups your [ethical responsibilities](#) to employees into five categories:

- Well-being: What's ultimately good for the person
- Rights: Entitlement to receive certain treatment
- Duties: A moral obligation to behave in a specific way
- Best practices: Aspirational standards not required by law or cultural norms
- Fairness: Impartial and just treatment

In the course, Hsieh outlines three types of fairness you can use when helping employees solve conflicts:

- Legitimate expectations: Employees reasonably expect certain practices or behaviors to continue based on experiences with the organization and explicit promises.
- Procedural fairness: Managers must resolve issues impartially and consistently.
- Distributive fairness: Your company equitably allocates opportunities, benefits, and burdens.

Particularly with procedural fairness, ensure you don't take sides when mediating conflict. Treat both parties equally, allowing them time to speak and share their perspectives. Guide your team toward collaboration or compromise, and work toward a solution that achieves the goal while maintaining—and even strengthening—relationships.

Are you interested in learning how to navigate difficult decisions as a leader? Explore [Leadership, Ethics, and Corporate Accountability](#)—one of our [online leadership and management courses](#)—and download our [free guide](#) to becoming a more effective leader.



About the Author

Catherine Cote is a marketing coordinator at Harvard Business School Online. Prior to joining HBS Online, she worked at an early-stage SaaS startup where she found her passion for writing content, and at a digital consulting agency, where she specialized in SEO. Catherine holds a B.A. from Holy Cross, where she studied psychology, education, and Mandarin Chinese. When not at work, you can find her hiking, performing or watching theatre, or hunting for the best burger in Boston.

