

Tips for Tackling the Toughest Workplace Conflicts

Tackle the issue after both parties have calmed down. If you're working on a group project and find that one of your team members isn't pulling his or her weight, it's best to discuss the issue before it escalates, says David W. Ballard, a psychologist and head of the American Psychological Association's Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program. "Address the issue early, before it turns into a bigger problem, but be sure to wait until things have cooled down," he says. "It's difficult to have a productive discussion if you and your co-worker are angry or upset. Wait until you are both clear-headed."

Maintain a positive outlook. Maybe your co-worker routinely takes credit for your ideas—a common occurrence in a competitive work environment. Rather than accuse her angrily, consider airing your complaints calmly. Keep an open mind throughout, and try not to assume that she will be unreceptive to your concerns. "Try talking directly with the person you are having the conflict with. Meet in a neutral place, remain calm, and treat the other person with respect," says Ballard. "Don't assume the other person is hostile or unwilling to work out a solution. If you're entering the conversation with negative expectations, you may unwittingly elicit the very reactions you are trying to avoid."

Ask the other person to suggest a solution. Maybe your cubicle mate's excessive personal calls are really starting to get under your skin. Rather than tell him off, consider addressing the issue at a time when you're both relaxed. "Consider various approaches and be open to ideas other than your own. Agree on a solution that both parties will be satisfied with and then discuss a plan for next steps," says Ballard.

Consider your role in the conflict. Being the first to gossip about a co-worker doesn't make you the devil. Just don't be surprised if the rumor gets back to said co-worker and she confronts you about it. In situations like these, Ballard urges employees to take responsibility for their actions and try to forgive and forget. "Be able to let go and move on after addressing the problem," he says. "You and your co-worker don't necessarily have to be great friends, but you do need to be able to work together in a collegial and professional manner."

Seek first to understand. Does one of your colleagues seem to dominate all office conversations, talking over everything you say? It might not mean she thinks she's smarter or more important; this could just be her natural inclination. Try not to jump to conclusions. "Many conflicts originate as simple misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and missed opportunities to clarify another's (or your own) intentions. You can mitigate or altogether avoid so many of your daily conflicts by simply seeking first to understand those with whom you interact," says Wendy E. H. Corbett, a conflict resolution consultant for 3rd Party Advisors in Mesa, Ariz. "While simple, however, this mindset is not terribly common or even encouraged in our fast-paced workplaces." Workers can illuminate their understanding of a conflict by honing their listening skills, asking clarifying questions, and earnestly seeking others' underlying interests, she says. This simple action not only halts its escalation; it opens the doors for early and lasting resolutions as well.

Be introspective. Conflicts arise in every workplace, and personality clashes abound in all of them. "Conflict is inevitable—plan for the future," says Ballard. "In the aftermath of a conflict at work, take some time to consider how you manage your emotions. How do you experience stress or anger? What triggers set you off? How do you tend to react in the face of conflict? ... What coping skills do you use? Are they healthy ones? Use this self-awareness to make a plan for handling conflict better the next time one arises."