

7 Ground Rules for Dealing with Interpersonal Conflict at Work

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On a mission to share about how communication in the workplace and personal relationships plays a large role in your happiness [Read full profile](#)

Interpersonal conflicts happen in all areas of our lives and work is no different. It's not necessarily a bad thing to have conflict. As a matter of fact, most people with expertise in communication between humans will tell you conflict can be a good thing. The key is to be able to deal with it in the right way.

If you can't work through a conflict to resolution, it only serves to become a road block. Having the ability to work through conflict in a meaningful manner can have many positive results. The trick of course is having some rules and ways of working through it to conclusion. With that being said, we will look at the different types of personal conflict, their causes and 7 ground rules for dealing with interpersonal conflict at work in this article.

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What Is an Interpersonal Issue?

Let's clear up something that may cause some confusion. From time to time, I hear or read about the terms interpersonal issue and interpersonal conflict. Really, they mean pretty much the same thing so when you hear one term instead of the other, don't let it confuse you.

In the broader sense, an interpersonal conflict is a disagreement in some manner between 2 or more people. The disagreement can be physical, mental, or emotional.

Since we are talking about interpersonal conflict at work, it's a good idea to expand this a little bit. When interpersonal conflict happens in the workplace, it can reduce productivity and make a dent in morale. At work, it takes on the shape that one person, or a group of people, frustrates or hampers another person or groups efforts at achieving a goal. This isn't always done on purpose as we will see. Nonetheless, it can be very frustrating and cause a lot of inefficiencies.

Types of Interpersonal Conflict

Let's take a look at the types of interpersonal conflicts.

Policy Conflicts

Policy conflicts are disagreements about how to deal with a situation that affects both parties. This happens in a variety of situations. Let's say you and a coworker are assigned to complete a project together. When you sit down to figure out the best way to complete the project, it becomes apparent you think one way is best and your coworker feels another method is better.

In looking at a situation outside of work an easy one is in a marriage. Maybe you think you and your spouse should be saving 10% towards retirement and your spouse thinks 5% is plenty. These are examples of policy conflicts. Many times, you can come to a [win-win type outcome](#) where everyone gets most of what they want with a little compromise.

Value Conflicts

Everybody has a different set of values. You may have values that are very close to someone else's but, we each have our own specific set of values. Sometimes, when you have an ongoing argument with someone, it's easy to think they are being stubborn. Normally, the underlying reason is because they feel strongly about something due to their values.

In your home life, you might think it's best to raise your kids a certain way and your spouse feels differently. At work, maybe your boss thinks it's okay to set up a form of payment for referred revenue and you think that isn't the way to do business. Value conflicts are typically pretty difficult to resolve because they are more ingrained.

Ego Conflicts

Ego conflicts are pretty tough as well. In this situation, losing an argument, or being thought of as wrong, can actually damage a person's self-esteem. This is like a power struggle.

Let's say you feel your spouse almost always picks where you go out to dinner. This seems to happen to the point that you feel you are losing power in the relationship because it seems like they always make the decision. So instead of letting your spouse continue to pick what restaurant you eat at, you almost always end up arguing about where to eat.

It's easy to see this type of conflict happening at work. Think about all the times you were asked to do something you don't really want to do. You don't want to feel like you are getting taken advantage of, so you find some way to dodge the work, put it on someone else, or simply ignore the request.

What Causes Interpersonal Conflict?

There's a long list of what can cause interpersonal conflict. Since we are focusing on our work environment, let's look at the 5 major causes of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

Frustration and Stress

People who feel stressed and frustrated at work tend to have more conflicts. People are simply more irritable and can get on each other's nerves much easier than other times.

The best course of action begins with being aware of the situation. When you see that your coworkers are frustrated, see what you can do to lower the stress level. Exceptional managers are very good at this. They can remove roadblocks and frustrations for their team.

Misunderstandings

Do you remember what they say when you assume something right? It's always best to get clarity around an issue if you aren't clear on what the expectations are. Were you supposed to follow up with Bill regarding next steps on the project or was I?

Misunderstandings are easy to come by. A huge area that can cause interpersonal conflict due to misunderstandings is having different expectations on a job, role, process, or anything work related.

Lack of Planning

This one is all too common as well. Many companies or departments within companies work by crisis. That is they don't really have plans for many things, they simply react to crisis situations.

Things never seem to improve because they don't put in a process for how to make something better. They are too busy running around like their hair is on fire. And when the fire is out, they relax for a day or two until the next fire breaks out. This can cause a lot of conflict and finger pointing.

Bad Staff Selection

This really shows up in 2 areas:

First of all in the initial hiring process. When someone gets hired into a role and isn't really doing what they were hired to do, someone else has to pick up the slack. You can bet the people picking up the slack are going to get angry and resentful sooner rather than later.

The other area this affects is on teams. Some people naturally gravitate to doing more than their portion while others tend to do less than their fair share. Both sides can rub people the wrong way and create conflict.

Poor Communication

I saved my favorite topic for last here. Poor communication can lead to so many problems. Interpersonal conflict at work is a big one. I'm sure you can think of many examples of when poor communication led to discord in the workplace.

You didn't receive the email the rest of us saw? Wonder why that is. The meeting has been moved to a new time and location – you didn't know that? The boss told me we are supposed to be working with the purchasing team on this, what did he tell you?

And on and on. This one is huge.

7 Ground Rules for Dealing with Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Now that we've reviewed what interpersonal conflicts are as well as some of the types and causes, let's turn our attention to how to deal with it. Here're 7 ground rules for dealing with interpersonal conflict at work.

1. Acknowledge the Conflict

The first step in solving any problem is acknowledging that there is a problem. The longer you bury your head in the sand and pretend there isn't conflict, the worse it will become.

Once you've acknowledged the conflict, take a look at it objectively. Be open and honest with yourself about what part of the conflict you may have contributed to. Look at it from a variety of angles, not just yours. See what you can do to help resolve this conflict.

2. Open up the Lines of Communication

Think of this as being the one to offer the olive branch. Once you've acknowledged that there is a conflict, be the one to open up the lines of communication.

Reach out to the other person or people and set up a meeting to discuss the conflict. Approach the upcoming communication in the spirit of collaboration. You are all working towards the same goal, it's okay to differ on the road to take. Work to create the sense of team that everyone can get behind.

3. Focus on the Problem, Not the Other Person

Try your best not to take things personally when addressing these conflicts. It's so easy to go down the path of thinking someone is doing something to you when in reality, that is rarely true.

Keep your focus on the problem and not on the other person or people. Remember to concentrate on solving the actual issue and not changing another person. It's highly unlikely you will be able to change someone else. Look for ways to work together to come to a resolution that will work for everyone.

4. Stick to the Facts

This is similar to focusing on the problem and not the person, but takes it a step deeper. When looking at why a certain conflict is happening, do your best to stick to the facts. It may very well involved another person but look at underlying reasons.

For instance, maybe the conflict is that Shelly doesn't answer critical emails in a timely manner. It's doubtful that she's doing it just to make people angry. Try the [5 Whys technique](#) to find out the true reason why with her. It could very well be that she has too much going on and is simply overwhelmed. What can be taken off her to do list so she can focus on the most important things? Are there processes that can be implemented that help move things through quicker? Stick to the facts.

5. Meet Face to Face

It's difficult to truly address a conflict virtually. An email here and there doesn't really seem to get to the heart of the matter most of the time. Nor is it very beneficial having a 10-minute meeting in someone's office when the phone is always ringing and their eyes keep skipping back to the non-stop flood of incoming emails.

Figure out a time and location to meet in person away from distractions. This way, you can take the time and focus needed to really address the conflict. Not to mention that sitting across the table from someone goes a long way towards enhancing the relationship.

6. Pick Your Battles

It's very easy to pick at just about every little thing, especially if you aren't the one doing it. In general, we all tend to think there's a right way of doing things, usually our own. There's always a wrong way of doing things, the way other people do the same thing. The point is there's only so much we can do.

I get frustrated by some of the inefficiencies of process in my job as well as some of the people that work in those departments. It doesn't make sense for me to consider each of these a conflict and set out to resolve it. There's a lot of things outside of my control and frankly aren't worth me spending too much time on.

If it's simply an annoyance, let it go and concentrate on things that are more important to you.

7. Make a Decision and Act on It

Finally, once you've addressed the conflict with the other party or parties, it's time to seal the deal. When you've come to a decision about how to handle a conflict, make an action plan. And most importantly, do it.

It doesn't do anybody any good to take the time and spend the energy resolving interpersonal conflict at work and then doing nothing about it. Once you've got it figured out, take the final step and take the necessary action to resolve it.

Conclusion

So now, you've learned about what an interpersonal conflict is as well as some different types. You have also understood some of the more common causes of interpersonal conflicts at work. Most importantly, you've learned the 7 ground rules for dealing with interpersonal conflict at work.

Remember and refer to the list the next time you find yourself facing difficulties with dealing with others on the job. Creating an action plan based on these ground rules will help you create a team oriented environment at work where everyone can thrive.

More About Dealing with Conflicts

- [Conflict Management: How to Turn Any Conflicts into Opportunities](#)
- [Conflict Management Styles for Effective Communication at Work](#)
- [11 Tips on How to Resolve \(Almost\) Any Conflict in the Workplace](#)

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