

Navigating Conflict: A Guide for Managers and Supervisors

Every organization will experience some degree of conflict; in fact, conflict is fundamental for all social beings. One of conflict's gifts is that successfully navigating through it can increase your organization's resilience by stress testing your structures, systems, and practices to result in an organization that is more transparent, consistent, and responsive in how it navigates internal challenges.

This guide is for managers and supervisors interested in improving how they navigate conflict among staff. An attentive, empowered, and skilled supervisor can increase staff's conflict management skills, increase a group's effectiveness, and strengthen a team's feelings of respect, trust, and belonging. Healthy conflict navigation requires discernment, tact, confidentiality, respectful withholding of judgment or premature promises for a resolution, and consistent communication with the parties involved. The supervisor therefore plays a powerful role in fostering a healthy culture and supporting consistent organizational practices related to conflict.

This guide includes a short outline of steps that can help managers navigate conflict between staff. It includes some self-reflection considerations, criteria for determining the likelihood of healthy resolution, and diagnostic questions to help you determine which pathways to develop. Those steps include:

- 1: Address Your Reactivity to Conflict
- 2: Commit to Your Role
- 3: Evaluate the Foundation for a Quality Resolution
- 4: Develop a Diagnosis
- 5: Determine Your Pathway
- 6: Follow Up, After Care, and Team Tending

Managers can't keep conflict from erupting, but they *influence the staff's quality of experience related to conflict*. They either support the healthy and effective navigation of conflict or contribute to its persistence, entrenchment, or even growth. There is no "sideline" or "non-participating" role for a supervisor. Once alerted to the presence of conflict, managers are responsible for responding in a timely manner so that it does not spread, create or add to harm, or cause other disruptions for your organization.

Step 1: Address Your Reactivity to Conflict

Though you may not be directly involved in the conflict, you are still responsible for supporting staff to work through it and resolving it. If they can't resolve the conflict—even with your support—you will need to step in, invoke and follow formal processes, and make final decisions. Any of these activities can cause you to experience feelings of stress, overwhelm, anger, frustration, and even resentment. Address those feelings thoughtfully so you can bring your best, most grounded self to your role.

Remember:

- *People are not **in** the way, they **are** the way.* As a manager, you steward your organization's human capacity to further its mission. Managers often think, "I'm just here to solve this environmental problem and these people keep getting in the way." However, people are your greatest asset and resource for making environmental and social change a reality.
- *You are not your role, but you must enact that role.* You will need to act or make choices that you personally might prefer not to. Shirking your responsibilities negatively impacts many people and harms your organization.
- *Everyone is likely doing the best they can with the skills and resources they have.* Very few people are out to purposefully cause mischief or derail others. Most work conflicts are rooted in misunderstandings, communication differences, or disagreements. Apply a green lens: why would a competent, reasonable, and qualified person do x? This approach can help you get to the root of the conflict with more clarity, kindness, and grace.

Step 2 and ongoingly: Commit to Your Role

Being a supervisor grants you unique authority and powers when conflict erupts. A supervisor can enflame or entrench conflicts by acting poorly. It may feel uncomfortable to you, but healthily managing conflict at your organization requires that you responsibly enact your role.

Appropriate Use of Power	Misuse of Power	Abuse of Power
• Describing options, processes, and possible outcomes • Providing clear updates on timelines and steps • Clarifying roles, expectations, and standards • Offering reasonable and meaningful support • Following a process, enforcing codes of conduct, and upholding standards • Determining a process has concluded • Making and enforcing decisions	• Ignoring or minimizing the problem • Taking sides • Triangulating by bringing other people into the conflict through informal measures • Making promises • Seeking to influence outcomes in line with your personal biases • Breaking confidentiality • Refusing or failing to offer meaningful and reasonable support	• Falsifying or withholding information • Undermining and interfering with formal processes • Inequitable standards • Retaliation, making threats, using or threatening formal processes to harass, intimidate, or manipulate behavior • Defaming individuals explicitly or through innuendo

Step 3: Evaluate the Foundation for a Quality Resolution

How a conflict is *experienced* is often more long-lasting than the cause of the conflict itself. There are three fundamental conditions that indicate how well a pair, group, or social system can healthily experience and work through conflict. The healthier and stronger these fundamental conditions are, the more likely it is for the conflict to be fully resolved.

Quality of relationship	Individual skill and capacity	Integrity of process
<i>Interpersonally</i> • Are trust and respect present between the parties involved? • Is everyone invested in each other's needs and quality of experience? • Is there a shared interest in improving the relationship? • Are participants experiencing this conflict or any feedback from this conflict as a personal attack? <i>Organizationally</i> • How invested is each person in the success of the organization? • How well does each person understand and respect the boundaries of their roles within a bigger system?	• How well do they manage stress and reactivity? • How well do they listen to understand and reflect back their understanding? • How clearly do they articulate needs, understanding of the issue, and possible solutions? • How flexible or rigid is their understanding of the issue and/or possible solution? • How well (fairly) can they negotiate? • How invested and willing are they in working out a solution?	• Is there a clear process that your group follows for this issue, or will one need to be designed? • Is the process and implications for each step well communicated and understood? • Is it clear who holds the process and is responsible for moving it forward? • Is the process being followed with fidelity, or are exceptions being made? • Is a rough timeline being communicated and respected? If there are delays, are those explained? • Are there consequences if the process is not followed? Are those clear?

If one or more of these areas are weak or unstable, you can still manage the conflict... however, the quality of experience for everyone involved will likely be more stressful or challenging, and a solution may *feel* unsatisfying. The conflict will require more individualized tending for the parties involved.

Understanding these fundamental conditions can help you pragmatically determine where to invest your focus and what pathways to pursue.

Step 4: Develop a Diagnosis

Developing a good diagnosis can help you disrupt unhelpful reactive tendencies, prevent short-sighted solutions, avoid ill-informed management strategies, and lead to a more comprehensive solution for the issue. Not all individuals will diagnose the conflict in the same way. However, being able to discuss or share the differences in diagnoses can help increase understanding (if not full agreement) and emerge pathways towards either resolution or responsible management.

Consider the impact that positional power or identity is having on the way the conflict is being experienced, interpreted, and talked about. This will help you sensitively develop a fuller understanding of the conflict and the options for managing it. A common challenge is individuals with positional power failing to use or misusing their authority due to identity issues at play in the conflict. If that seems to be the case, work on coaching the relevant parties to enact their role responsibly.

Step 5: Determine Your Pathway

The steps you take depend on your understanding of the conflict, the resources available to you, and your organization's protocols. Clarify the pathway for everyone involved, communicate frequently about the steps, and hold everyone to the process. You have a powerful range of tools at your disposal that you can use along the path you develop:

Clarifying standards, expectations, and roles: Review the job description and clarify with the staff member how they should coordinate and communicate related to shared projects, where they have autonomy and decision making, and where you need to be cued in before choices are made. Clarify and answer questions as far as what "success" looks like in the role, and make sure to check in regularly regarding those indicators. Take the time to also confirm any expectations related to the role that aren't explicit in the description, such as what "timely" means, etc. If the job has shifted or needs an update, redefine their responsibilities and consider updating their job description, title, or role.

Coaching: Support staff to develop understanding, create a pathway, take action, and helping them be accountable to following through

Setting priorities: If a staff member manages numerous projects or finds their capacity challenged, you will likely need to support them to clarify what is a top line item that needs their full attention, and which projects can be shelved or completed less thoroughly.

Training and professional development: Even the most experienced and capable staff have areas they can continue to grow into and strengthen. Support your staff by providing a scan of the core skills and expertise their role requires, then work with them to identify their growth areas. Training and professional development may look like attending workshops, classes, or conferences, mentorship, shadowing another worker, or self-directed studies.

Making a decision: Supervisors decide on the allocation of organizational resources to support staff and also lead processes such as annual reviews, developing workplans, performance improvement, and even termination. You have the greatest insight into a staff member's work and will make decisions related to their opportunities and longevity at the organization.

If the conflict starts to get personal between individuals or escalates to involve others, your pathway will likely need to change. Are individuals railroading efforts towards resolution or undermining pathways they don't agree with? Are they not respecting clear standards related to conduct and role? If those do not improve, you will likely need to escalate this into a more formal HR process such as a Performance Improvement Plan, a complaint or grievance process, or even termination.

Step 6: Follow Up, After Care, and Team Tending

As a manager, you may be surprised when staff still have feelings about a conflict long after you felt it was resolved. When people are engaged in conflict, their whole body's stress system tends to get activated. Make space to have a proper "ramp down" from the conflict with your staff by making time for discussions to process their experience, reflect on their learnings, and identify the strengths that helped them navigate the matter successfully. Collectively making a symbolic gesture—such as a handshake, a toast to celebrate a new agreement, or a circle of affirmations for everyone involved—can deeply improve everyone's experience of conflict and formally demarcate its end.

Be diligent about making time to meet with staff about the conflict anywhere from 1-3 months after the matter was resolved to see how new agreements, processes, or practices are working out. You may find some adjustments need to be made. Make sure to take time to reflect on *your* management of the situation, as well as your organization's responsiveness or reactive tendencies. Debrief those learnings with a director or peer, or document them so you can refer to those insights for future use.

Lastly, the way *you* talk about conflict can support a culture of conflict resilience—one that recognizes conflict as an opportunity to hone each other's understanding, communication, and ability to work through differences.

A final note on resolution

Resolution is a deeply subjective experience. We tend to be wired to want to "win" at conflict, which is rarely helpful for the kinds of enduring relationships we hold with our colleagues and community partners. Even then, many people who "win" the concessions they fought for can still feel aggrieved, while the "losers" may completely forget about the entire matter. The myth of winning and losing is a powerful one that we need to challenge when it comes to workplace conflicts.

We tend to define "resolution" as the absence of any challenging or difficult emotions related to the experience of the conflict. However, it is more pragmatic and useful to shift our definition of resolution away from emotional perceptions to a focus on learning and personal growth. Conflict is an opportunity if we are willing to healthily engage with it.