

Developing a Conflict Management Policy

A Conflict Management Policy can help your organization support productive experiences of conflict by offering clear and explicit expectations, standards, practices, and pathways for action. A useful Conflict Management Policy also helps staff differentiate between generative or disruptive conflict and provides guidance on the appropriate steps they can take.

This resource provides guidance for what you may choose to include in your own Conflict Management Policy as well as some considerations for possible practices you may want to foster for your organization.

Any Conflict Management Policy is just one part of a suite of activities and tools that support your organizational culture including clear policies, management practices, staff training, and on- or off-boarding processes.

Your policy should include the following components:

- Purpose and goals for the policy
- A description of the organization's cultural goals and the value of healthy conflict for strong teams
- Expectations, indicators, and definitions
- Expectations for staff conduct when navigating conflict
- Indicators of healthy vs unhealthy or unproductive conflict
- Definitions for key terms such as disagreement, conflict, complaint, or grievance.
- Processes
- A description of the pathways and practices for addressing conflict at various stages of escalation, from minor disagreement up through formal grievance
- The action steps staff and managers can or will take at each stage
- Descriptions of the possible outcomes for each stage

There are many practices, pathways, and processes an organization can use to manage conflict. You'll want to consider the size, organizational complexity (various roles staff hold, who interacts or reports to whom), and resources your organization can reasonably spend to support staff's skills and growth. Those resources include time, attention, leadership, and money.

Practices You may Consider as Part of Your Conflict Management Policy

- Direct Person-to-Person Communication
- Supervisor or Manager Involvement
- Open Door Policy
- Investigations
- Peer Mediation
- Impaneling a Committee
- Trainings

- Professional Mediation
- Arbitration

Description of each Practice

Direct Person-to-Person Communication

By training, encouraging, and rewarding staff for directly engaging with one another, you can strengthen communication and relationships throughout the organization. If you include this as a pathway or practice for conflict management at your organization, your Conflict Management Policy should provide explicit standards for conduct and communication between individuals navigating conflict. Those should include definitions of timely communication, clarity of feedback and requests, and action steps individual staff should take before they escalate the matter to others for support.

Supervisor or Manager Involvement

By escalating a conflict to a manager, a staff member opens several pathways. The manager can clarify roles and standards if those are at root of the conflict; the manager can coach the staff member to improve direct dialogue with each other; a manager may even support informal mediation by serving as a facilitator for direct dialogue between staff; in some cases, a manager may make a determination for steps that need to be taken and then enforce them.

Consider what activities the supervisor could or should be engaged in and when. Offer clear descriptions for those steps. Make sure to identify the relevant skills and training(s) a manager or supervisor would need to competently follow through on those activities. Also ensure that those skills and training opportunities are added to the manager's job description and individual development plans as needed.

Lastly, at what stage does being in a conflict escalate into something more formal at your organization? Formal means anything that your organization needs to document because it will be entered in someone's personnel record. This includes a complaint, reviews, results of any investigations, performance improvement plan, or even a grievance. Ensure that your managers and supervisors are trained in documenting those efforts and can follow through on your policies.

Open Door Policy

An Open Door Policy encourages staff to bring their conflicts to any senior staff person for support. The senior staff tend to be directors of departments or team leads, not just the Executive Director, and can provide more access points for staff to elevate concerns. Open Door Policies can be useful if someone has a sensitive concern or complaint about someone they report to or if they are embedded in a department-wide conflict and concerned about group dynamics. This policy can be useful for organizations with or without HR leads.

Open Door Policies aren't cure-alls and should be well-defined for clarity of purpose and use. A poorly defined policy can keep staff from offering direct feedback to each other by triangulating a complaint to someone else. This can potentially create the perception that a conflict is worse than it is and take senior staff's time and attention away from more

urgent parts of their job. Open Door Policies can unintentionally increase conflict by creating intrigue or confusion around an issue, especially when complaints are brought forward frequently, anonymously, and without a good process to substantiate those complaints. Open Door Policies fail and harm the organization's culture when staff observe differences in how complaints are managed or not addressed at all.

However, a well-defined Open Door Policy can increase staff trust in the organization's responsiveness to their concerns. Individuals tapped with hosting an Open Door should have a clear understanding of their role and follow through on timelines and communication with the complainant, ensuring that it's addressed. They may require additional training or support to ensure consistent responsiveness.

Investigations

When conflicts are elevated to a supervisor's attention, some information gathering or investigation may be required to confirm details and establish the facts. This may be conducted by a supervisor for minor disagreements or conflicts, such as determining the causes of an error or miscommunication. Investigations may be conducted by an HR staff member, Executive Director, or even a designated Board member related to a complaint or grievance. You may decide to set a protocol to hire an external investigator, usually an attorney or HR consultant, if the matter has legal implications for your organization or staff. Rather than waiting for a case-by-case basis to react to these challenges, you may want to define when an investigation is necessary, who will conduct it, and how it will be managed.

Peer Mediation

Identifying and training key staff member(s), regardless seniority or role, to offer peer mediation can increase your team's communication skills and promote a shared sense of responsibility for the organization's culture. This can also help normalize the presence of healthy conflict in organizations and encourage staff to practice conflict resilience and growth.

Most people have little or no experience with mediation and may expect to approach it antagonistically where they seek to "win" as much as possible. However, mediation is a process that seeks to help parties find an agreement that improves their ability to keep working together.

Peer mediation is helpful for conflicts that are entrenched, primarily related to disagreements when direct communication has been challenging or gone poorly. Anything related to individual performance or poor conduct should be managed through supervision.

This practice is best used for groups that are willing to deeply invest in their organizational culture and where staff have the interest and capacity to utilize this practice. Mediation is time intensive, requiring clear practices and even training to navigate well. There are online programs, such as those hosted by the Mediation Training Institute, that provide quality, certified workplace mediation workshops.

Impaneling a Committee

Your organization may tend to default to giving supervisors, HR managers, or Executive

Directors discretion for determining how more entrenched conflicts are resolved. However, you can distribute responsibility for making determinations around disputes by establishing an organizational practice of impaneling and empowering staff to review specific types of conflicts and making a determination of what should happen next.

This process may be most useful for matters like determining conflicts of interest or if there is strong organizational disagreement between teams related to implementing a policy change, rather than resolving disputes among staff.

Trainings

By investing in periodic trainings for staff and managers, you can elevate staff's communication practices and normalize collective responsibility for guiding organizational culture and promoting healthy conflict in your teams. Trainings may focus on communication, conflict styles, leadership development, supervision training, or self-regulation and resilience.

Professional Mediation

Sometimes a conflict is best handled by a specialist that has no connection to your organization. This is particularly useful when power dynamics require special confidentiality such as when a Board member or ED is a participant in the conflict, robust documentation of the conflict and its discussion is desired, the organization has the resources to enlist professional support, and both parties agree that a professional mediator would be helpful.

Professional mediation works best when both parties commit to the process and are held accountable to the outcomes they agreed upon.

Arbitration

Arbitration is a legally binding process in which a professional reviews the terms of a dispute and decides on an outcome. It's often employed when a conflict has escalated into allegations of reputational harm, financial misconduct, or other damages but both parties are willing to forego a trial.

Most workplace disputes that are settled by arbitration result from a pre-dispute contract signed by staff as part of their terms of employment. Check with a non-profit attorney to determine if arbitration is a reasonable option for your organization and to understand the scope of any pre-dispute contracts you may adopt.

Sample Definitions

- **Disagreement:** When two or more parties have different opinions related to a decision or event.
- **Conflict:** The experience of discord related to disagreement.
- **Complaint:** When someone informally brings forward a concern, often about something that is dissatisfying or in need of support or improvement.
- **Grievance:** When someone brings forward a formal complaint that requires a documented process to address. Typically used to address actions, experiences, or behaviors that are unacceptable, fraudulent, harmful, or dangerous.