



Personal Tool

Strategies for dealing with conflict

COVID-19 appears to have an ever-surprising impact on the world. In 2020 it has impacted workplaces in many ways, one of which is conflict in the workplace.

Conflict in the workplace has traditionally been when two people are in the same workspace, and their differences become intolerable for both parties. In 2020 where working from home is the new normal across Australia and New Zealand for many industries (despite low infection numbers in both countries), requests for conflict resolution have increased.

There are some logical explanations for this. Perhaps with the distance and the lack of face to face interaction employees are calling out challenging behaviours more than they usually would. Perhaps virtual communication (Zoom/teams/email) leads to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of intention and meaning. When working alone, it is easier to miss body language or tone and to make assumptions or not see another's perspective. Thirdly, employees may now feel safer to call out what they perceive to be difficult behaviours or conflict in the workplace.

If you feel that there is a conflict with your colleague, manager or subordinate, and you need some skills and techniques to step forward, there are strategies that can assist you. If the situation is feeling unmanageable or you are overwhelmed, please do not hesitate to contact us to book an appointment for assistance or advice.

Here are some strategies to assist those who are experiencing some conflict in the workplace:

- **Figure out your own stuff first.** This means that if you are not sleeping, upset with someone or something look at your own reactions and take the time for self-reflection (which is painful) and ask for assistance from a trusted partner or friend to see if your reactions are reasonable.
- **Be clear with what you want to do with the current level of conflict.** Take a moment to think if you want to raise the issue with the other party and what you want the outcome to be, e.g. understanding, resolution or being heard.
- **Before starting the conversation, take a moment** (and maybe take time to discuss it with a trusted person first) and think about the other person's perspective, what might they be thinking or feeling?
- **In preparation for the conversation, check-in,** and see if you are open to a range of ideas and strategies. What do you need to express, what do you need from the other person? Can you listen and ask them what they need? Put aside blame or judgements that you may have in the spirit of resolution and moving forward.



- **Humanise the other person.** If you are struggling to connect with the other person, look at ways to find common ground with that person. Brene Brown tells us that people are harder to hate up close. This reduces the “yes but...” Acknowledge the differences in work styles and communication approaches. Focus on trying to understand the differences.
- **Redirect the negative energy.** If you are finding it difficult to manage with the other person’s idiosyncrasies, look at stress inoculation techniques like mindfulness, physical activity and managing stress in all aspects of your life. In some situations, if you can calm your own emotions, you can avoid becoming hooked in the other person’s emotions.
- Psychologists work with their clients to teach them to recognise when they have been triggered. **You can identify your triggers**, understand them and then work on how to manage your responses. In this way you can avoid conflict escalating. If you are not sure what your triggers are book yourself in for an EAP session and have a confidential conversation about possible triggers and strategies.

Conflict is hard, and self-reflection is even harder. The big message here is that if there is conflict in the workplace (or home or family) please do not take it personally (even if it feels personal). Conflict is normal, and that is simply a by-product of life being messy. If you have a PhD or left school as soon as you legally could – you are not immune to conflict. Hot headedness can be normal often after increased physical restrictions, a pandemic or a recession and seeing emotions as a tunnel that we must travel through for it to dissolve.

Perhaps the strategy here is to find a way to wipe the slate clean and attempt to try again. The feedback sometimes is that “it’s too late” or “too much has happened” for a blank slate. To do this, it is important that your role is acknowledged and the feedback is processed. But in our experience of working with human behaviour, it is never too late to ask for a reset. Of course, this is situation dependent – but practice taking feedback on and rewording your questions, emails, and communications.

Overall, tensions are naturally going to be more intense in 2020 (a year like no other). Workplaces, like dining out and air travel, will probably never look or feel the same. Find a strategy that allows for speaking to be understood and listening to understand (in the words of Steven Covey) and most importantly letting the frustration go. So, give yourself a break for not seeing the world in the same way as others and celebrate the difference. For a confidential conversation with one of our experienced clinical professionals, please contact **AccessEAP** on **1800 818 728**.

