

FACING CONFLICT? IT'S A LEADER'S LOT

New and experienced managers alike encounter conflict day in and day out. It's one of the most difficult challenges they and their communities face. But successful leaders learn productive ways to minimize the problems caused by conflict and, in fact, generate positive outcomes. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has conducted research to determine perceptions towards conflict and appropriate conflict responses.

"Managers consistently rank the ability to effectively deal with conflict near the top of essential leadership skills."

Conflict occurs when people possess or express contrary values, interests, goals, orientations, principles or feelings. At its core, conflict is disharmony, dissension, division and discord between people, interests or ideas. Conflict is also natural - where there are people, there will be conflict.

Successful leaders understand that managing conflict is an essential part of maintaining effective interpersonal relationships, but that doesn't make it easy. But it is also a skill they admit they most need to develop."

In organizations, tensions between individuals need to be defused or focused in order to find productive solutions to problems. Conflict can generate discomfort, anger and ineffective behavior. Feelings such as fear and resentment can rise to the surface. Organizational issues such as unclear lines of authority, power, politics and ineffective support systems also come into play.

If it is well managed, conflict can have positive outcomes. It can:

- Increase effort;
- Air feelings;
- Lead to better decision making;
- Expose key issues;
- Stimulate critical thinking;
- Create open environments; and
- Stimulate creativity and innovation.

Choosing to develop the skill to successfully manage conflict has many rewards, but also requires commitment. While there are numerous approaches to conflict resolution, fundamentally it requires the following:

Motivation. Make it your work to seek resolution to conflicts that block effective relationships, thwart effectiveness, create dissension, distract from organizational objectives and threaten results.

Mindfulness. Develop an awareness of your role in conflict situations. Realize that what you do and say has an impact on others for good or ill. Try to understand how others see you.

Maturity. Pay attention to the bigger picture and think strategically. Learn the difference between what you can change and what you must accept. Maturity requires knowing what you can't allow to happen and what you can accept if it's a way to a solution.

Managing Conflict with Your Boss

What happens when you and your boss don't see eye-to-eye? Do you work through it? Let it simmer? Or does it blow up into a full-scale, high-emotion confrontation? Whatever the reaction, conflict with your boss can greatly impact your ability to be an effective leader.

"Recognizing and resolving conflicts with your boss begins with understanding the circumstances under which the conflicts can arise."

"A conflict with your boss doesn't necessarily spell the end of your career with an organization," says CCL faculty member Davida Sharpe. "But it may well define to what degree you can effectively do your job."

Recognizing and resolving conflicts with your boss begins with understanding the circumstances under which the

conflicts can arise. To gain perspective on conflict, consider the root cause, expectations and viewpoints contributing to the problem.

Root Cause

The underlying dynamic of your relationship can create conflict between you and your boss. Conflict is often rooted in the following factors:

- **Lack of role clarity or alignment.** You are not sure about how your work supports the mission of the organization. You may think you're doing tasks that should be on your boss's list. Your boss may think that she or he is doing too much of your work.
- **Different vantage points.** You and your boss may not pay attention to or respond to the same things because you don't hold the same position in the organization.
- **Lack of confidence.** You lack confidence in your boss's ability and/or your boss lacks confidence in you.
- **A mismatch.** You and your boss are mismatched in some way. Typical areas of difference include ethics, values, integrity, management style, motivation and personality.

Expectation Gap

Another typical reason for conflict between bosses and their direct reports is differences in expectations. CCL has found that there are four factors that your boss is likely to value most: resourcefulness, doing whatever it takes, being a quick study, and decisiveness. These four factors do the most to shape your boss's evaluation of your performance and

Seven Steps Toward Managing Conflict

1. **Build personal awareness.** Understand why you think and feel the way you do when reacting to a conflict situation.
2. **Clarify your conflict view.** Examine your perception of the conflict and your underlying assumptions.
3. **Understand the perspective of others.** You must be able to see things from another point of view to manage conflict successfully.
4. **Brainstorm solutions.** Have a discussion. Express yourself honestly and openly, be specific, ask for feedback and look for common ground.
5. **Create an action plan.** Determine how you will address the issues and resolve the conflict.
6. **Implement your action plan.** Be sure to update your boss on your progress.
7. **Evaluate your action plan.** Reflect on what worked and what didn't. Learning from experience will help you better manage conflict in the future.

to define your boss's expectations. If you are experiencing conflict with your boss, part of that conflict may stem from your failure to understand or meet your boss's expectations in one or more of these key areas.

Managing Conflict with Direct Reports

Avoidance is a common response to conflict with direct reports. But for most new managers, it is a strategy that will backfire. Leaving conflict unattended not only breeds trouble in the organization, but it can put the brakes on your future as a leader.

"Successful leaders learn to face and manage complex or emotional conflicts."

On an ongoing basis, there are several steps managers can take to effectively handle conflict with and among their direct reports. First, understand that emotions can trigger conflict. Second, clarify performance expectations so direct reports know what's expected of them. Third, provide ongoing feedback for the support and development of direct reports.

When conflict does arise, McManigle suggests following a clear process to become more adept at facing conflict with direct reports:

Recognize both sides of the conflict. When a conflict happens, take ownership of your part in it; then consider your direct report's view. Be aware that differences in perspective can affect the conflict. Managers who look to see both sides of conflict have a better opportunity to resolve the issue.

Prepare for a conflict resolution session. Think through your perspective and concerns so you are prepared to identify and describe the conflict. Focus on behaviors and avoid perceptions, innuendo, gossip, judging motivation or analyzing intent. Then choose a setting. It may be a formal appointment, or it can be as informal as stopping by the direct report's desk for a chat.

Discuss the conflict. Once you've prepared yourself, it is helpful to take a six-step approach to discussing the conflict with your direct report.

1. Indicate your desire to seek an outcome that will be best for both sides and the organization.
2. Define the problem from your point of view. Be specific in describing the situation (who, what, where, when), the behaviors displayed, and the impact the behavior had.
3. Ask the direct report to define the problem from his or her point of view. Then find common ground by identifying issues on which you agree.
4. Identify and evaluate potential solutions. Consider unusual or creative options. Choose a solution each of you can accept.
5. Develop an action plan for implementation. Define the behaviors and results you expect to see. Make sure the direct report understands exactly what you will do and what you expect from him or her. Find out how he or she sees the work going forward.

6. Plan follow-up meetings to check on progress. Both formal feedback sessions and general conversation will help you and the direct report stay on track.

Review the process. After the conflict resolution session, spend some time reflecting on what you learned. Consider: What would you do again? What would you do differently? How will you be viewed after this conflict management session? Can you build on this encounter to further develop your direct reports?

Managing Conflict with Peers

Power and politics are among the trickier aspects of conflict resolution when dealing with your peers. Conflicts that arise from incompatible goals or from different views on how a task should be accomplished can usually be resolved. But when peer conflicts involve office politics and power, you may find yourself struggling to achieve your professional and organizational goals.

"Conflict between peers often is tied to the interplay between formal and informal power."

"Peer conflicts can have high stakes because often your peers have the ear of your boss, and in a future management shuffle, one of your peers may actually become your boss," says CCL faculty member, Talula Cartwright.

When professional peers work as independent contributors or together as teams in an organization, conflicts are bound to occur.

This is especially true in today's flatter organizations, where managers depend on peer relationships to get their work done and power is dispersed.

"Conflict between peers often is tied to the interplay between formal and informal power," says Cartwright. "During a conflict, peers can feel that their power is being threatened, their authority is being questioned or dismissed, or their hard-won territory is under assault."

Formal power may be held through position - one department or job title "ranks" more important than another - or through a mission-critical task or project. People with specific expertise or information, a supportive network, and valuable rapport and influence hold informal power.

Recognizing the formal and informal power structures in your organization can help you understand the conflict and resolve it. You can better see the motivations and connections in the organization and use them to create common ground for resolving conflict.

Other steps to managing conflict with your peers include:

Partner with Peers

When two people are in conflict, it's easy to see them as adversaries or opponents. But CCL has found it useful to think of them as conflict partners. Neither person is totally wrong or right. Instead, each is a partner in an uncomfortable situation.

By managing conflict with peers in a collaborative or partnering way, you can find an underlying common principle on which you both agree. From that common point both of you can move toward a resolution.

- **Taking a different perspective.** Try to understand your peer's point of view, motivation and reactions. Ask for examples to clarify the issues. Let go of your own assumptions.
- **Creating a solution together.** Look for points of mutual agreement and interdependence and build from there.
- **Expressing emotion.** Explain how you feel and why, but be sure to remain courteous and professional. Don't cast blame.
- **Building relationships.** Consider how you want to be viewed by others after the conflict is over. Make the effort for a good working relationship and reputation for the long term.
- **Reflecting.** Understand what happened in a conflict. Note your initial reaction and analyze why you had that reaction. Take the time to consider alternatives, solicit the ideas and opinions of others, and to learn from each experience.
- **Being optimistic.** Look forward, not back. Find the best in others and in the situation. Keep trying.

APPROPRIATE TRAINING IS VALUABLE IN ALL THE ABOVE CIRCUMSTANCES.

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