

SIGMA Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Manage Conflict**



GREAT LEADERS **MANAGE CONFLICT**

“ When you’re in **conflict** with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between **damaging your relationship** and **deepening it**. That factor is **attitude**.

— William James

Most leaders strive for a conflict-free workplace. While this sounds ideal, it is not a realistic expectation. People have different goals, needs, and values. In situations where employees are in regular contact with each other, disagreements can arise from a variety of sources, such as identifying the team’s goal or deciding how to complete a project. Tensions can also develop between individuals whose personalities clash, or when miscommunication occurs. Conflict can also waste company time and resources if left unresolved.

Many people avoid conflict in the hopes that it will go away on its own. But, like neglecting the dentist’s appointment when you have a cavity, avoiding conflict only gives it time to become more serious. It is better to tackle issues early and directly. It is equally important, however, to deal with conflict in healthy, constructive ways. Successful conflict management involves mediating and resolving disagreements in the best manner for everyone.

To assess your ability to manage conflict effectively, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I promote the handling of disagreements in positive, constructive ways?
- Am I honest, considerate, and open-minded during interactions with others?
- Can I control my emotions when discussing points of conflict?
- Do I set aside time to prepare for and engage in challenging conversations?
- Do I use open-ended questions to clarify other people’s points of view?
- Am I a reflective listener, making others feel heard and understood?

Improve Your Conflict Management Skills

Realize that conflict can be constructive: When managed effectively, conflict can have positive results that benefit both parties—such as strengthening relationships, developing more innovative solutions, or promoting change¹. Research shows that work teams perform better if they discuss issues openly and have high levels of trust and respect². Therefore, it’s important to cultivate a workplace environment in which conflict can be resolved constructively, rather than with heated tempers or a “win-lose” attitude.

Be mindful of your communication style: Successful conflict resolution requires effective communication. To avoid conflict, some people accommodate others, conceal their feelings, or withdraw. On the other hand, some are forceful about getting what they want, often at the cost of others' feeling. Neither style is effective³. However, there is a middle road—assertiveness. Assertive individuals are honest, direct and polite, but also open-minded and considerate of others. Assertive approaches balance the achievement of goals, maintenance of social relationships, and support for personal well-being⁴.

Separate your emotions from the issue at hand: When conflict arises, it can be tempting to point fingers. Leaders should set a positive example by remaining calm and composed. For example, when expressing your own thoughts and feelings about a disagreement, do so without assigning blame. Instead, remain open and curious to other points of view, remembering that everyone will have a different perspective of the situation. Consequently, by putting yourself in others' shoes, you can understand where they're coming from and can facilitate more productive conversations.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Manage Conflict More Effectively

The following steps can help you become better at managing conflict:

- 1. Devote time to managing conflict.** Leaders also want to make it clear to their staff that they take conflict—and the opinions of their team members—seriously. Increase your success in managing conflict by investing time in handling it. For example, give yourself a moment beforehand to decide how you will approach the conversation and overcome potential challenges. Then, set a formal meeting with the parties involved. Schedule plenty of time so that neither party feels rushed or distracted.
- 2. Direct the conversation.** By understanding the other person's interpretation of the issue, you can more easily find a resolution that benefits both parties. During the meeting, state the issue in neutral terms and explain your perspective using "I" language. Be direct, but polite—nobody likes feeling criticized or blamed. Meanwhile, watch for telltale cues, such as raised voices, which signal that the conflict is escalating. Take a break, if necessary, to allow emotions to calm down. Additionally, avoid closed-ended questions, which generate vague yes/no responses. Instead, use open-ended questions to gather more information on the other person's feelings or goals.
- 3. Practice reflective listening.** Reflective listening involves focusing on what the other person is saying, and then paraphrasing their feelings and intended meaning in a respectful, non-judgmental way. This ensures that you fully understand the other person's point of view, and shows that you are trying to see the issue from their perspective. Validating people's experiences reduces defensiveness, builds trust, and keeps communication open. Above all, note that reflective listening does not involve

mindlessly agreeing with the other person, or pretending to understand when you do not. Rather, it means that you are an active participant in the conversation⁵.

Resources



[Finding Confidence in Conflict](#)



[Why We Should Be Disagreeing More at Work](#)



[Develop](#) your ability to manage conflict by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

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