

Dealing with Conflict and Resolving Problems

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1. Introduction

Sometimes in the workplace, people will come to you with problems. Most people I hope will be polite when they present their problems, but this is not always the case. Sometimes people will be angry or frustrated even before they get to your desk, so their emotions and language may display this anger or frustration when they talk to you. To handle this situation, there is a much greater chance that solutions will be found if both parties keep sight of the main objectives and maintain a positive tone.

Causes of conflict	Conflict resolution strategies	Conflict is not always negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic demands • Personality differences • Poor communication • Misunderstanding • Failure to appreciate cultural difference • Lack of commitment • Lack of knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify obstacles and overcome them • Set achievable goals • Be sensitive to others • Respect cultural difference • Summarize and stress common ground • Stress mutual interest in coming to an agreement • Change your package • Make concessions • Take time out to think and cool down • Leave and return later to problem areas • Change personnel/location • Involve a mediator • Forget it and call it a day! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential benefits • Moves the negotiations forward quickly • Reveals differences which need to be resolved • Improves understanding of positions

2. Dealing with Conflict

You can appear less confrontational with a few simple techniques.

a. Moderate your requests with “perhaps” or “maybe” to sound less demanding.

A: Go to the tax office in the main building. They will help you.

A: Maybe you could go to the tax office at 6204. They will help you.

How to use “perhaps” and “maybe”.

- Perhaps/Maybe + s +modal auxiliary verb + main verb

Perhaps/Maybe you could call her.

Perhaps/Maybe you can give me your number and I will check.

b. Use modal verbs *could, would, may, might* to be less direct.

A: This is a problem.

A: This could/would/may/might be a problem.

What are modal verbs?

- *Modal verbs are helping verbs; they help the main verb in a sentence. In our context (conflict), they can be used to be less direct and softer.*
- *Examples of modal verbs are: can, may, might, will, could, should, would, ought to*

How to use modal verbs

- *S +modal verb + main verb*

- Modal verbs are followed by main verb without to (You could ask / You could ~~to~~ ask)
- Modal verbs do not take s in 3rd person (She may help / She ~~may~~s help)
- We add **not** to make the modal verb negative (She could **not**... / ~~She doesn't~~ could)

c. Preface disagreement with “I’m afraid...” or “I’m sorry...”

A: *I can't help you.*

A: *I'm afraid I can't help you.*

How to use “I’m afraid...” or “I’m sorry...”

- S + am/is/are + afraid/sorry + s +negative + main verb (+ o)

I'm afraid I don't know.

I'm sorry I can't help you with this, but I can...

d. Use indirect questions as much as possible; these are polite and formal.

A: *Can you email me today?*

A: *Would you mind emailing me today?*

Direct Questions are informal and less polite:

- A+S+I

Do you have your address?

- Q+A+S+I

When can you give me the file?

Indirect Questions are formal and polite.

- *I wonder if I could + verb (infinitive) + o*

I wonder if I could have your address?

- *Would you mind +verb (ing) + pr + o?*

Would you mind giving me the file?

- *Would you mind if I + verb (ed) or verb(irregular past) + o?*

Would you mind if I gave you the information later?

e. Be direct in your responses, don't misinform or mislead people.

A: What is my tax rate?

B: Maybe its 6.3%.

A: Maybe?

B: Oh, honestly, I have no idea, em maybe you could ask Jiwon in the tax office, here is her number. If you need me to organize a meeting between you and her, I can do that. What do you think?

A: Yes, that would be great. Does she speak English?

B: I'm not sure, would you like me to have someone translate for you at your meeting?

A: Yes, that would be wonderful, thanks.

B: No problem, I'll call her now and set it up.

f. Use diplomatic language

- *Understate by adding: **a little, a bit***

You are late with this work.

You are **a little / a bit** late with this work.

- *Avoid negative words: **awful, terrible***

Use **not very** + positive word

It was awful/ terrible.

This is **not very** good.

3. Dealing with Complaints

a. Ask for information

What is the problem exactly?

Could you explain exactly what the problem is?

b. Saying sorry

I see. We're very sorry about that.

Again, I do apologize.

c. Explaining the reason for the problem

I'm afraid that we can't/couldn't....

The reason is that....

The problem was caused by....

It was a clerical computer error.

It was an oversight on our part.

d. A promise of action [will]

I'll deal with it/attend to it/send an engineer immediately.

I'll find/arrange a replacement right away.

Is that acceptable?/Is that OK?

e. Your fault

It's our fault. We accept full responsibility.

We are to blame. We should have.... (sent it yesterday.)

f. Their fault

I'm sorry but you didn't inform us that you wanted manuals.

g. Close

I apologize once again. We are very sorry about this.

I apologize for any inconvenience caused. It won't happen again, I assure you.

4. Dealing with Questions

a. Positive response

That's a good/difficult/complex/an interesting question.

Thank you for asking that question.

That's right.

Exactly.

Yes, it is.

b. Check your answer

Does that answer your question?/Is that OK?

Is that clear now?/Can we move on?

c. Asking for Clarification

If I understand you correctly, you want to know... / *Yes, I'd like to know why...*

You're asking me about.... Is that right? / *Yes, that's right. What does this...?*

Sorry I didn't follow/catch the question. / *Okay, Where do I ...*

Could you repeat that for me, please? / *Sure. I live in dorm and I...*

In other words, you're asking.... / *Exactly.*

So, you...Is this an accurate summary of where you stand?/ *Yes, that's it.*

The most important thing for you is.../ *Yes, it is.*

As I understand it, you would like to...Is that right? / *Perhaps I should clarify that.*

I didn't understand. What exactly do you mean by...? / *When I said...I meant...*

Could you clarify one point for me? / *Of course.*

When you say...are you saying that...? / *Not exactly. What I was saying was...*

Could you say a little more about...? / *Sure.*

d. Show Interest

Go ahead

Of course.

Yes, certainly.

Please do. Go ahead.

e. Refer back

As I said earlier, I can...
Yes, I mentioned earlier that...

f. Accept criticism

I accept that./That's a fair point/I agree with what you're saying.
Up to a point, I agree.

g. Referring back to earlier

As said/pointed out/explained earlier,....
I think we've already made it clear that....

h. Avoiding

Wrong person

I'm afraid I can't really answer that.
That's not really my area/field, I'm afraid.
I don't have the figures with me.

Wrong topic

I'm afraid that's confidential./I'm not at liberty to give you that information.
I'd be glad to discuss that with you at your convenience.

Tennis – returning a question

Well, let me ask you the same question.
OK. Let me ask you a question.
I can answer that by asking you a question.

Hedging

Well, that depends on what you mean by....
Well, it's a very complicated matter....
Well, there are various ways of looking at it.

5. Voice Tone(when dealing with conflict)

Be aware of how loudly you are speaking. A quieter voice sounds more polite than a louder one, and especially more than shouting. For example, "I do not want to go," when stated in a low, quiet voice is more likely to be interpreted as a polite request, than if the same statement was said stridently, like a demand.

Use a soft tone when speaking politely. Even if the volume of your speech remains the same, tone can change the implication of your words from anger and hostility to respect and politeness. For example, if you say, "I do not want to go," with an emphasis on the word "not" or "I" and annoyance in your body language, you will sound less polite than if you keep the tone even, do not emphasize any words and remove emotion from your voice.

Tip: Even when someone has spoken rudely to you or you feel you have been insulted, replying in a polite manner is often the best approach. Speaking politely sends the message that you have not been unnerved and are the one still in control.

6. **Body Language**(when dealing with conflict)

Here are some quick questions to ask yourself:

- Where are you in relation to the person you are talking to?
- Are you in a higher or lower position than him/her?
- Are you sitting down with someone standing over you?

Here are some quick body language tips:

- a. Don't stand too close to the other person. Create the imaginary fence.
- b. Try to either stand together or sit together.
- c. Invite someone to sit down –sit down at the same time. (We can work together)
- d. Try to sit at an angle, not directly opposite.
- e. Your hands should always be out in front of you, preferably palm up, and open and never clenched.
- f. If your hands are open it sends a message that you come in peace.
- g. If you cannot see some ones hands, people feel less comfortable.
- h. If you feel the need to be a little more assertive, but not aggressive, try facing your hands downwards to the floor.
- i. If your person moves around the room make sure you move round too with your hands always in front of your body acting as a sensory tentacle.
- j. Make intermittent eye contact
- k. Listen and respond with your face.
- l. Remember position is key when resolving a conflict.

7. Some Quick Cross Cultural Comparisons (when dealing with conflict)

Country	Characteristics	Tactics	Key needs
U.S.A.	Enthusiastic-open Tough-competitive Friendly-superficial Action oriented – impatient	Time pressure Bargaining Small concessions Power-threat	“Win” the best deal Get results Cooperation Recognition
Japan	Formal-polite Group focused Impassive Efficient – advanced technology	Logical Show commitment Time delays Linked package deal	Save face Long preliminaries Long-term relationship Gifts
U.K.	Verbally indirect Polite-formal Can seem unprepared Fair	Good deal for both parties Humor and wit Conservative presentations Fair offer – modest concessions	“Win-win” outcome Reliability Private space Progress
Latin countries	Emotional-lively Personal-volatile Enthusiastic	Bargaining Emotion Changes-last minute delays	Understanding Personal relationship Loyalty

8. Golden Rules (when dealing with conflict)

DO	DON'T
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Have clear objectives with strategies for concession and rollback.2. Know the negotiating culture of your partner3. Establish a positive climate of collaboration when you meet.4. Communicate your objectives simply and efficiently.5. Listen to the other side to identify their priorities.6. React positively and constructively to proposals.7. Identify common areas and win-win solutions for both parties.8. Be sensitive to the psychology of the other party.9. Say 'yes' to the person even when you have to say 'no' to the idea.10. Be consistent.11. Avoid misunderstanding and confusion by checking and rechecking.12. Reach agreement.13. Summarize the deal.14. Define the future relationship.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Set unrealistic targets.2. Use language which is too complex for people to understand.3. Try to employ 'clever' psychological tactics.4. Make assumptions about the other party's position.5. Say 'no' to a proposal too quickly.6. Limit yourself with short-term thinking about short-term gain.7. Lock yourself into positions.8. Threaten the other side.9. Stop listening if you disagree.10. Make promises you can't keep.11. Leave a negotiation without understanding the deal