



# Managing Workplace Conflict: A Structured Guide

**Building professional workplace relationships by addressing conflict**

Developing, maintaining, and repairing respectful and professional workplace relationships is a fundamental part of any good manager's responsibilities.

Conflict is one of the reasons that workplaces can become fractured and this can get in the way of a thriving, happy and productive workplace. Addressing conflict through well planned and structured conversation can help restore respectful and professional relationships that support individual wellbeing and allow organisations to get on with business.

## **What is structured conflict resolution?**

In the workplace, a structured conflict resolution conversation takes place between a manager (or mentor/coach) and an employee (or individual) who needs help to improve their professional relationships that have been damaged (or not established) because of conflict.

Key features of a conflict resolution conversation are:

- The overall goal is to help restore and maintain respectful and professional working relationships
- It is a voluntary and solutions focussed process
- The conversation takes place between a manager and one individual employee
- It helps an employee to take independent action in managing the conflict situation
- It helps employees who may be prone to conflict to develop skills that help them avoid unproductive conflict
- The method centres on the manager guiding the individual through a process of self-insight and discovery so that they can actively make their own way to restoring respectful and professional working relationships.

The conflict resolution conversation is not intended as a situation where the manager solves the problem, gives the 'answer' or tells the employee what to do. The conflict resolution conversation is suitable for situations where there is no clear "management decision" to be made - if it is clear, the manager could easily step in and solve the problem. It is also not a forum to submit a complaint or reprimand an employee.

The conflict resolution conversation process is suitable for situations where, for example:

- *relationships are fractured*
- *communication has broken down*
- *one or many parties have contributed to the problem and the conflict*
- *an individual is prone to conflict*
- *a workplace practice, policy or process cannot be used to fix it*

### **Get the timing right**

The timing of a conflict resolution conversation will most likely be after management has become aware of conflict or poor working relationships, and it appears that intervention is required. The structured conversation about the conflict should not be a 'surprise' to the employee, therefore:

- The conversation should be a pre-arranged meeting where the employee knows that the topic of conversation is about working through conflict and building professional workplace relationships.
- The employee needs to be willing to participate in the process of building professional workplace relationships and approach the meeting with that in mind.
- Talk to the employee before setting up the conversation time and tell them that you are aware of the situation and would like



to work with them to restore professional working relationships. Ask them if they would like to accept your help to work through the situation.

- If they are willing to work with you, set the meeting.

### **Some employees might not be ready for this process**

If there are discipline issues related to the employee and a performance management conversation needs to be had, reconsider your timing of the structured conversation and why you are having it. If there are serious performance issues, they need to be addressed before you can move on to conflict resolution and genuinely rebuild professional and respectful relationships.

If an individual is unwilling to participate, unwilling to explore constructive conflict resolution and restore professional workplace relationships, you may need to seek other avenues such as poor performance/conduct procedures or seek professional intervention or mediation.



### Get prepared

It is important to be well prepared for a structured conversation and that you, as leader, approach the conversation with an attitude of positive intent.

Remember, the overarching outcome is to restore respectful and professional workplace relationships. Try these tips to get prepared:

- ✓ Make some notes for yourself and think about the process before you commence
- ✓ Familiarise yourself with any relevant workplace facts, policies or processes that might be related. This way you can avoid wasting time on points that are not negotiable or details that are required to make realistic decisions
- ✓ Arrange a one on one private talk with the individual at a time when you both have plenty of time and no distractions
- ✓ Make it clear that the purpose of the conversation is help them work through the situation and restore relationships. They are not being reprimanded
- ✓ Suggest that the individual read
  - ➔ [Luemo article Navigating Your Way Through Workplace Disharmony](#)
  - ➔ [Luemo article Understanding Workplace Conflict](#)

### Five stages for managing the conflict resolution conversation

The following guide sets out a five-stage process to help the manager guide the employee in building independent skills in resolving conflict, with a view to restoring professional working relationships.

Stages one and two are about the past and present. The first two stages allow the individual to tell their story including all of the information, issues and feelings that are important to them. This then positions the employee to be able to articulate what they now need to move forward. Stages three, four and five are future focussed, and centre on options to move forward, learnings and action.

You will find that every situation and employee is different, so use the five stages as guiding principles and add your professional experience, knowledge, and skill to make it work for the situation.



### Set up the conversation for success

Setting the right tone and atmosphere for the conversation is important to get right up front. The atmosphere needs to be open, positive, unhurried and solution focussed. Try these tips:

- ✓ Thank the employee for their time and acknowledge their willingness to address the situation
- ✓ Reiterate to them that you have positive intentions in helping them resolve the conflict and restore professional working relationships
- ✓ Tell them that you want to help them work their way through this – rather than you as their manager imposing a decision

- ✓ Check in that they are still comfortable with taking responsibility for their workplace relationships
- ✓ Reiterate that you are trying to help them work toward a solution, that you are ready to explore possibilities with them and approach the conversation with openness and honesty
- ✓ Check they are comfortable with explorations and honesty
- ✓ Ask them to tell you what they would like to get out of the meeting

## Some opening statements

- ✓ Thanks for taking the time to meet today. I'm glad that you are taking some time to work through this.
- ✓ We all want to work in a place where we have respectful and professional relationships.
- ✓ You are well respected as part of the team here and I know you have best interests at heart.
- ✓ I'll admit I've been concerned about this but I have every confidence that we can work together, get through it and be even better on the other side.

## Ask them

- ✓ What would you like to get out of our conversation today?

## 2 Invite the employee to talk about the situation from their perspective

In this stage, ask the employee to give you their perspective on the situation and how it has come about. Let them talk freely without interruption and listen without judgement of their perspective.

The manager's role is to help the employee gain further insight by guiding them to points that they may not have acknowledged or thought of previously; for example, how have they contributed to the conflict or are there unspoken issues that are contributing to the conflict?

Try these questions:

- ✓ Tell me what is going on for you at the moment?
- ✓ Talk me through how this has unfolded
- ✓ What do you think has been the cause of the conflict or relationship deterioration?
- ✓ How are you feeling about it?
- ✓ What led you to that conclusion?
- ✓ What do you think the other person would say has caused the conflict/relationship breakdown?
- ✓ How do you think they may feel about it?
- ✓ If you could replay this scenario, what would you have done differently?
- ✓ How do you think your behaviour/choices may have affected the other person?
- ✓ What would a respectful relationship have looked like?

The process of talking through the issues helps with personal insight and empathy. They may have never thought about how their own behaviour affects others or how other people may feel about the situation.

You will know it is time to move on from this step if the employee starts repeating information or diverts on to being unreasonably speculative or negative about the other person's perspective. If they do divert to unhelpful topics, gently bring them back and remind them to be respectful. Then ask them if they have anything new to add.

Expect that the person may become emotional, upset or teary during this stage. You may also find unexpected information or personal unrelated information is revealed. If the individual becomes emotional, angry or disparaging toward others, remind them to be respectful. Consider taking a few moments to have a break if you feel it is required.

The last few questions are a helpful lead into stage three regarding exploring options:

- ✓ How would you like your relationship to look in the future?
- ✓ What do you feel you need to move forward?
- ✓ What do you think the other person might need to move forward?

By the end of this step the individual should feel they have relayed their perspective and all feelings in relation to the situation and be ready to turn their thoughts to the future. At the end of this stage, both you and the individual should have a mutual and reasonably clear understanding of their preferred goal/outcome or what they need to move forward. It will be helpful to write down the goal or what they need to move forward.

### 3 Explore future options

Move the meeting on to a future focussed conversation and encourage the individual to explore potential options for moving forward. It is important to attempt to generate a number options and encourage open-mindedness about where a solution can be found. More than one option is usually required as a person's 'ideal' outcome is often unattainable (this is often why there is a conflict).

In the first instance, focus on generating the options and writing them down with little or no evaluation. Getting bogged down in evaluating an option before thinking of the next one can stifle the creative process of generating multiple options.

Once you have a list, move on to evaluate the options. This will include the pros and cons of each option and what may be lost or gained with each option. It will also be important to discuss the reality of each option being actionable or acceptable. You may find there are multiple suitable options that can be deployed.

## Questions to help generate options

- ✓ What do you see as a way of reaching your goal or preferred outcome?
- ✓ How do you think the situation can be handled?
- ✓ What's a different way of getting the same outcome?
- ✓ What are some ways to build a respectful and professional relationship now?
- ✓ Would an apology be helpful?
- ✓ What else might work for you moving forward?
- ✓ What do you think will work for the other person moving forward?

## Questions to help evaluate the options

- ✓ What are the pros or cons of that option?
- ✓ Do you think that option will be acceptable to others?
- ✓ How realistic is it that option can be operationalised?
- ✓ What will you lose/gain?
- ✓ What will the other party lose/gain?

At this juncture it can be useful to reiterate the importance of finding a resolution and moving forward. Bring it to their attention that if the situation is not addressed and relationships cannot be professional, the future will be affected in some way. This can be quite motivational for someone who may be 'stuck' and helps them accept that conflict and poor working relationships are not sustainable. Ask:

- ✓ If there is no acceptable solution, what is the worst-case scenario?
- ✓ If there is no acceptable solution, what is the best-case scenario?

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#### Reflection and learning

Take some time to reflect on what has come out of the conversation so far. It can be interesting to see how an individual's perspective and attitude can change after talking through the situation and challenging them to work through possible solutions.

Encourage the individual to talk about any self- insight they may have gained or empathy they have developed. Is there something they can do proactively to start a healing process with another person – such as offer an apology or acknowledge a behaviour, or show appreciation?

At this stage, as manager, you may be able to contribute some ideas, or general information that will add to the individual's learnings. For example, you may be able to highlight to the individual the difference between being assertive or aggressive; how to reframe statements so that they are more gratefully received; appreciating different behavioural styles; or appreciating different personality styles.

## Ask some questions

- ✓ Given this conversation, have you formed any different or new views of the situation?
- ✓ Do you think there is something you could do to start a conciliation process?
- ✓ What do you think are your 'hot buttons' you need to watch out for? How might you prepare and what will you do?
- ✓ What do you think you could say or do differently moving forward?
- ✓ What challenges might come up?
- ✓ What help might you need, or skills you need to develop, to help you achieve your goal?

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**Action plan and conclusion**

Guide the individual through a plan for moving forward and make some notes about steps or 'tasks' that they can get working on.

For example:

- ✓ What conversations could you have to start moving forward?
- ✓ What is the plan for those conversations? What will be the goal, content, and behaviour requirements?
- ✓ How do you want to be perceived? What behaviours will help with that?
- ✓ How are you going to nurture the skills that you need?

It may be helpful for you to assist in the planning of the anticipated conversations and even practice/role play the conversation.

By the end of the conversation the employee should have some notes and their mind focussed on the future, not the past. While they may be feeling uneasy or unsure of the future, you have started them on their new journey. The structured conversation process is not a situation where finality is assured, or all problems resolved. The conversation is the beginning of the employee's new journey to change the way they handle relationships and restore existing relationships. You may plan to have a follow up conversation or check in session in the following days or weeks.

Finalise the meeting with the employee and thank them for working hard on a plan forward and their commitment to restoring respectful and professional workplace relationships.

**Follow up and check in**

In the following weeks, check in with the person to see how they are going.



This will help keep them motivated and your encouragement will help them feel supported. This may be an uncomfortable time for the person as they try to make a difference. Personal behaviour change can be difficult. Be persistent and supportive.

Consider that you may need to undertake this process with other people who are involved in a particular conflict; or, if you are trying to address a culture of unproductive conflict in your team or organisation you may find these principals helpful to call upon in ad hoc situations.

**A note on mediation of two or more parties**

Workplace mediation is a professional skill developed through formal study and supervised practice in professional settings. Mediation is conducted between two (or more) parties in conflict, and a professional mediator facilitates the session through a structured outcome focussed process. Having multiple parties in conflict in the same meeting presents significant challenges.



Instead, consider this: The best approach to resolving conflict and restoring relationships is for the employee/s involved to take responsibility for the situation and way forward. This is the philosophy of the Five Stage Conflict Resolution Conversation. If employees are taken through the structured conversation process individually with a skilled manager and no suitable result has been achieved, a joint conversation is unlikely to be successful.

If management have attempted to resolve workplace conflict with those involved individually and have been unsuccessful, **the best next step is to seek professional advice or assistance from a qualified mediator.**

The dynamic of a professional mediation is quite different compared to the Five Stage Conflict Resolution Conversation for individuals that is described in this tool kit.

Only a qualified mediator should attempt to undertake a mediation process when serious workplace conflict has arisen. If you feel your workplace situation would benefit from mediation, contact a professional mediator registered with the Australian Mediation Register.

At times, it may be suggested and considered that a skilled manager facilitate a workplace conversation between two parties that are experiencing conflict or a breakdown in their professional relationship. **Approach this with caution, as a meeting facilitated by an unqualified mediator can result in further serious damage to the relationship and one or both parties involved feeling seriously aggrieved, which creates new business risk.**