

EIGHT SIMPLE RULES

To Resolving Conflict and Improving Relationships

By Greg Giesen

Managing conflict with coworkers doesn't have to be difficult. Below are eight simple rules that should both help you deal with conflict and improve your relationships at work.

Rule 1: See conflict as an opportunity

Your perception of conflict has a direct impact on how it plays out in your life. If you embrace conflict and see it as an opportunity to better a situation or a relationship, then you'll take on the challenge of seeing the confrontation through, regardless of how difficult it may be, because you know that the ultimate benefit of working through an issue will be worth it in the long run for both you and your working relationship with the other party.

If, on the other hand, you disdain conflict and would rather lie on a bed of sharp nails than address a problem with a coworker, you'll be more inclined to avoid it, mismanage it, or even deny its existence. In either case, your negative perception of conflict will prevent you from dealing with it effectively. Furthermore, avoiding conflict only makes it more likely that the issue will continue to be a source of contention with no end in sight.

Keys: • Begin by breaking away from the following myths around conflict:

- a) Conflict is negative.
- b) Conflict is about winning and losing.
- c) Conflict, if left alone, will resolve itself.
- d) Conflict only impacts the parties in conflict.
- e) Your past determines how you handle conflict today.

• The truth is, only you can determine what conflict means to you. However, if you truly want to be better at resolving conflict, then it's important to view conflict from a new perspective:

| | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| From | To |
| Negative | Positive |
| Disruption | Opportunity |
| Incompatibility | Diversity |
| Error/Mistake | Improvement |
| Right/Wrong | Differences |
| About the <i>person</i> | About the <i>issue</i> |

• By approaching conflict as an opportunity, any reluctance you have will begin to dissipate with practice as your confidence grows.

Rule 2: Choose your battles

Take on the issues that matter to you and/or that impede you from being as effective as possible on the job and let the rest go. Life's too short to be wasting any of your valuable time and energy on issues that ultimately don't matter or that don't impact you in a detrimental way.

Keys: • Think through an unresolved or current conflict and do the following:

- a) Identify the benefits of resolving the problem for you, for the other party, and for the people impacted by this conflict.
- b) Identify the potential costs of not resolving the conflict for you, for the other party, and for the people impacted by this conflict.
- c) Compare your findings. If the benefits outweigh the costs, then you need to address the problem, regardless how uncomfortable it might be.

• Always have an *exit strategy* (i.e., avoid, accommodate, let it go, turn the other cheek, or just walk away) for the irrelevant or non-important issues.

Rule 3: Do your homework

The more prepared you are to address and resolve a conflict, the better you'll do. This includes taking the time to think through the problematic issue(s), personality dynamics, relevant past experience and desired outcomes before engaging in an authentic conversation to resolve a conflict with another party. It's no different than preparing for a speech or an exam. With preparation, you become more confident, focused, and in control of your emotions.

Keys: • Always remember that the people who trigger you the most are often your best teachers. Why? Because these people bring out your vulnerabilities, insecurities, and hot buttons that actually end up revealing more about you than about them. That doesn't mean that your conflict is less legitimate, but just don't forget to include yourself when examining the problem. You'd be surprised what you might learn.

• If you find yourself judging another person's actions without knowing the intent behind those actions, ask that person first what they meant or why they did what they did before attributing any motives to them. What you will often discover is that there was a well-meaning or humorous intention that went astray. Wouldn't you want others to do the same with you?

• Consider thinking through these questions prior to talking out a conflict:

- a) What's your desired outcome for both the *relationship* and the *conflicting issue*?
- b) In order to achieve those outcomes, how do you need to be in the discussion so as to ensure the greatest chance for success?
- c) Do you know what the problem is and are you prepared to propose a solution, if needed?

- d) Are you willing to hear the problem described from the other party's perspective, including how you might have contributed to the conflict?
- e) Are you willing to compromise in order to reach agreement?
- f) If the conflict should happen to escalate, do you have an exit strategy?

Rule 4: Take the initiative

Conflict is not about who's right or wrong, who's more at fault, or who should be the first one to apologize to the other. The fact is that if the conflict is bothering you, then it is yours to resolve. Waiting for the other party to come to you doesn't help you address the problem; it only prolongs it.

Keys: • Never hold on to an issue, a wrongdoing, or an unresolved conflict. Find a way to address it, resolve it, or let it go. This is about you taking care of you.

• The benefits of taking it upon yourself to resolve a conflict include:

- a) You are taking care of yourself.
- b) You are managing the relationship between you and the other party.
- c) You are not allowing a problem to fester inside of you.
- d) You are role modeling effective conflict resolution to your peers.
- e) You are holding the other party in the conflict accountable for their actions.

• If emotions are high and/or you don't feel safe initiating a conversation with the conflicting party, consider a third party facilitator/mediator to intervene. This could be your supervisor, a human resource representative, or an outside facilitator.

Rule 5: Focus "out" before focusing "in"

Focusing "out" means understanding the other party's point of view before expressing your own. Why does this matter? Because it puts the other person at ease knowing that their concerns have been heard and validated. When people feel listened to and acknowledged, they have a tendency to relax and lower their defenses. This not only helps ease the conversation, but increases the likelihood that the other party will be more willing to hear your side of the story.

Keys: • Why active listening is so important:

- a) It allows the other party to vent.
- b) It provides clarity for you on the problem from his or her perspective.
- c) It validates the other party's concerns.
- d) It shows you are willing to collaborate.
- e) It helps diffuse any anger the other party may have.

- f) It allows you time (since the initial focus is on them) to think through your response.
- g) It provides you with information that you may not have had, allowing you to respond from a more informed perspective.

- Improve your ability to become an active listener now by asking questions and paraphrasing in your everyday conversations.

Rule 6: Seek mutually beneficial solutions

Successfully managing conflict means having the ability not only to bring an issue to resolution but also to do it in a respectful, collaborative manner with the other party. One without the other will greatly diminish your results.

- Keys:**
- If you always treat the other party in a conflict with respect, you will have discovered the quickest way to resolution.
 - If emotions are high, you are better off postponing a confrontation until you can be reasonable and rational. Unloading emotions might make you feel better, but if it is at the expense of coworker, you could end up making things worse.
 - Keep the discussion on the conflicting issue and/or behavior and stay away from personal attacks. By separating the issue from the person, you have a much greater chance for resolution.
 - Follow these steps when addressing a concern:
 - a) Begin by acknowledge the importance of having an effective working relationship with the other party.
 - b) Tell the other party that the purpose of your conversation is to share a concern that you feel is impacting your working relationship with them.
 - c) Describe the particular behavior that is causing a problem for you.
 - d) Explain how the behavior is impacting your ability to get your work done.
 - e) Propose a solution.
 - f) Seek the other party's input.
 - g) Get agreement.
 - h) Talk about how to handle any potential problems together before they occur.
 - i) Thank the other party for his or her willingness to collaborate with you.
 - j) Always follow up with the other party a week or so later to ensure that things are working better.

Rule 7: Empower the *third side*

In a conflict, there's your side, there's their side, and there's the "third side." According to William Ury, author of *Getting to Peace*, the third side in a conflict is all the people who are directly and indirectly impacted by someone else's conflict. Although many *third-siders* see themselves as innocent bystanders, they actually have a tremendous influence on establishing a work environment that either supports constructive and functional conflict resolution or reinforces dysfunctional and destructive conflict resolution.

- Keys:**
- As a team, work group and/or department, establish group norms and expectations around managing conflict effectively and productively.
 - Make sure that everyone understands his or her role in ensuring that norms are followed when conflict amongst members occurs.
 - Schedule biannual teambuilding sessions to further develop working relationships while instilling a greater sense of team.
 - Establish and enforce consequences for any member of the group who disregards the established protocol for effective conflict resolution.

Rule 8: Be proactive

Instead of waiting for a conflict to occur before practicing these eight simple rules, why not start today by enhancing your working relationships and applying the concepts in this article to the smaller, more manageable office issues and disagreements. After all, the goal here is to develop some momentum and patterns of success now so that you'll be better prepared to take on any bigger, more volatile issues and conflicts in the future.

- Keys:**
- Be proactive both individually and as a work group, as follows:

Individually

- a) Solicit feedback from others on your strengths and weaknesses as it pertains to managing conflict.
- b) If there are areas to improve, enroll others in supporting you by helping you manage conflict more effectively as well as providing you with feedback when you're not.
- c) Handle any and all issues when they occur.
- d) Periodically check in with coworkers to assess how your working relationship is going and could be improved.
- e) Role model the behavior you expect to see in others.

As a work group

- f) Schedule biannual teambuilding sessions to further develop your working relationships, established norms, group communication, and team cohesion. Allow for any specific issues brought up by or affecting the whole group to be raised as well.

- g) Incorporate more humor in the workplace. Do fun activities as a work unit together periodically. You'd be surprised at the impact laughter can have on creating cohesion in a group.
- h) Learn more about each other's personalities and communication styles. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the True Colors Personality Profile are great in helping your work group better understand each other.
- i) Should an incident/conflict occur within the group, don't be afraid to debrief it with the group after it has been resolved. This will provide an opportunity to assess how it was handled and to reinforce the group norms in the future.

Conflict, if managed effectively, can be a tremendous asset in helping individuals and groups maneuver through issues, disagreements, and problems that are common in today's workplace. Hopefully, these eight simple rules will provide sufficient guidance and incentive to help you take charge of conflict forevermore.



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