

## Apply a constructive approach to prevent, resolve workplace conflicts

Memphis Business Journal - by Barbara Richman

Conflicts occur within all organizations. Their results can be positive or negative, depending on whether our interactions with one another are respectful or confrontational. Applying a consistent and constructive approach to conflict prevention and resolution can influence these interactions and have a positive impact on individuals and the overall organization.

Differing perspectives and opinions can lead to a productive exchange of ideas and foster a more cohesive environment if they are handled respectfully. However, these differences can have an adverse impact if they become confrontational. Interactions that are disrespectful can lead to damaged relationships with co-workers and customers, morale and productivity issues, and increased turnover. On occasion, the consequences can include incidents involving angry outbursts, threats, fighting and other conduct that cannot be tolerated.

Positive results can be achieved if those in leadership positions and employees at all levels of the organization adopt a constructive approach to preventing and resolving conflicts. These outcomes are dependent on the ability of leaders to serve as role models for employees. They also depend on management's ability to communicate expectations, provide training or other assistance in developing applicable skills, hold employees accountable for their actions and reinforce appropriate behaviors.

The following are tips for applying a constructive approach to workplace conflicts:

1. Develop an awareness of your personal triggers, such as an increased workload, competing time demands, being expected to do more with fewer resources and financial pressures. Although you will not be able to eliminate all causes of stress, you can find ways to minimize the potential for triggers to negatively impact how you interact with others.
2. Take responsibility for your actions. Understand that the only person's behavior that you can control is your own.
3. Use self restraint if you become frustrated or angry. Pause before responding, gain control over your emotions and question whether the actions that you are preparing to take will be

confrontational or in keeping with your overall objectives. Be mindful of the following quote by P.M. Forni, “Restraint is the art of feeling good later.”

4. Avoid damaging relationships by making decisions based on negative assumptions about another person’s intentions. Take time to question these beliefs and gather relevant facts before determining an appropriate course of action.
5. Adopt a solution-driven and realistic perspective when working with others to resolve conflicts. This frame of reference will influence your ability to gain a mutual understanding of the issues involved, focus on areas of agreement and develop viable alternatives for consideration.
6. Practice positive self-talk. Understand that what you tell yourself can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Your confidence in your ability to resolve conflicts can be increased or diminished by what you tell yourself in these situations.
7. Ensure that all aspects of your communications demonstrate respect for others. Your body language, words, tone of voice and ability to listen play a key role in the way others perceive how they have been treated.
8. Gain an understanding of issues that are creating conflicts by listening intentionally, periodically restating or paraphrasing what the other person is saying and asking questions. This clarification provides a basis for defining areas of agreement and disagreement.
9. Understand that listening to diverse viewpoints and differing perspectives does not indicate that you agree with what is being said. A willingness to listen provides a basis for understanding, exchanging ideas and information and learning from others.
10. Choose your words carefully when opinions differ. Avoid confrontational language, such as name calling, lashing out and generalizing. These types of remarks are likely to result in defensive reactions, cause discussions to digress from their intended focus, and detract from your overall efforts.
11. Guard against personalizing conflicts and focus on objectivity. Your ability to be objective will be increased if you do not allow yourself to take differences personally. The potential for discussions to be objective also will be increased if you “attack” issues and not individuals.
12. Be cautious about applying negative labels, such as “opponents” or “adversaries,” to co-workers and others with whom you disagree. Characterizations of this nature, even if they remain unspoken, can influence your perceptions and create problem-solving barriers.
13. Recognize that there may be times when there is a need to “agree to disagree” about unresolved issues. At a certain point, it may be beneficial to the relationship to make note of any remaining areas of contention and acknowledge that resolution could not be reached to address those differences.

14. Consider whether methods of follow up should be developed in order for agreements to achieve long-lasting results. Question if there is a need to monitor progress, establish guidelines for handling related issues, provide training, or put similar mechanisms in place.

BARBARA RICHMAN is a senior consultant with HR Mpact, a Memphis human resource consulting firm. She can be reached at (901) 685-9084, (901) 496-0462 or [barbara@hr-mpact.com](mailto:barbara@hr-mpact.com).