

How Managers Can Mitigate Conflict

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It would be nice if we could wave a magic wand and have all workplace disagreements disappear. In the close confines of a call center or an inside sales organization, conflicts will happen. As the manager, you may be asked to assume the role of a mediator. It is important that you understand what your role should and shouldn't be and also what communication skills you need to bring to the table.

First and foremost, your role as a mediator is to **facilitate** the disputants in resolving their **own** issues. It is not to be King Solomon. Who says **you** have all the right answers or that your solution would be agreeable to **them**? While not every mediation attempt is going to be effective, mediation is always worth your time and trouble. It demonstrates to your entire workgroup that you care and that you place a high priority on working as a team.

The mediation process cannot begin until the disputants' stories have been heard and understood. People have different perceptions of the same problem so each version needs to be aired. As the mediator, begin by setting an agreeable meeting time for gathering information. Do **not** meet separately with the parties because participants will be more likely to exaggerate and intensify the impact of the situation. Your job is to remain neutral and gather information. Separate meetings can give the impression

that you are an ally and that **you** are going to decide the appropriate action.

Begin your meeting by telling both parties what your role is—that of a facilitator and what you expect of them—finding a resolution to their conflict. Tell them that you are going to let each of them tell you their story. Set up some ground rules about interrupting and bringing up ancient history. Realize that disputants are typically very angry and can and will act rudely towards each other. They also often have a hidden agenda to persuade you to side with them. You will have to work hard at staying neutral and controlling how people act.

As people tell their stories, make sure to use active listening. Demonstrate with your body and face that you are listening. Nod, maintain strong eye contact, use appropriate body language and pause to demonstrate you are listening. Do not agree or sympathize with them. Remain neutral. The individuals involved should be doing most of the talking, not you.

Your objective should be to gather information on the nature and scope of the conflict. You may need to ask some open-ended questions for clarification. For example, "What happened?" "What did he do?" It is best not to ask leading questions or questions where the person answers yes or no. "Why" questions almost always put the person on the defensive and should be avoided. When you notice that the body language is different from their words, ask participants how the situation made them **feel**. Sometimes feelings are harder to get at. Open-ended questions are the key.

Periodically, summarize what you have heard and ask for clarification. When the party seems finished, give a detailed summary of their whole story by beginning with a statement such as "as you see it..." Summarizing helps people to focus on the problem at hand and to think about it objectively, maybe for the first time. Complete your summary by asking if there is anything else. Once both parties agree that you have gotten their story correct, they will be open to the mediation phase of the problem-solving phase.

In the mediation or problem-solving phase, your role is to ask the participants for **their** suggestions so that they can find a mutually agreeable action plan.

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Your job is not to offer suggestions, even if asked. Neither is it to evaluate the validity of the solution. The other disputant will do that. Again, you will need to use good listening and questioning skills to make sure that each proposal is clearly understood. Periodically, repeat what you have heard and ask for clarification. Silence is a good technique when people cannot seem to agree or do not seem to have any suggestions.

Summarize any little agreements that are reached. This will help people to feel progress is being made. Finally, put the agreed plan in writing and make sure everyone signs it, including you. A written plan makes people accountable for holding up their end of the bargain. Schedule a follow-up session so that any adjustments to the plan can be made and so that you can assess how the conflict is being resolved. Your applause to their hard efforts to change behavior cannot be underestimated.

While none of us like to be pulled into a mediation role, it is important for us as managers to do so when morale and productivity seem to be jeopardized. Your success at mediating a conflict helps others to see possibilities for working out their own disagreements. A conflict that is handled well builds cohesiveness and creates a problem-solving atmosphere so important in a call center's effectiveness. You play an integral role.

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