

Negotiating workplace conflicts: 9 tips for managers



Conflict happens in all corners of the workplace. But if issues aren't settled, bad things can happen: Good people quit, morale can plummet and, sometimes, violence can erupt.

But supervisors and managers don't need to become certified mediators to settle disputes. You just need to understand some basics about human behavior, practice the fine art of paying attention and offer yourself as a neutral party who wants to resolve the problem.

Here are nine insights and tricks of the trade, according to a new book, *Improvisational Negotiation*, by Jeffrey Kravis:

1. Let people tell their story. When people are deeply upset about something, they *need* to get their story out. This is a basic principle of mediation and one that's important to remember.

Yes, allowing people to speak their minds *can* increase the level of conflict with which you must deal. That's OK. You have to get through the conflict phase to find the solution. Sometimes, feeling that he's finally "been heard" can dramatically change an angry person's outlook. Plus, as the employee tells the story, new information may come to light that allows a solution to emerge naturally.

2. Bring a reality check to the table. Often in a conflict, the parties are so focused on minutiae that they lose sight of the big picture and its implications. As the mediator, you need to bring people back to reality by wrenching their attention away from the grain of sand and having them focus on the whole beach. Doing so may help resolution arrive at a startling speed.

3. Identify the true impediment. In every conflict, ask yourself: *What is the true motivating factor here? What is really keeping this person from agreeing to a solution?*

When you can identify the impediment, then you can predict how the person will respond to certain ideas and you can shape negotiations accordingly.

4. Learn to "read minds." Mind-reading is not magic. It is a combination of observation and intuition, which is born of experience. You can learn a lot about how each party sees a dispute by paying attention to body language and listening closely not only to their words but also to the emotional tone behind their words.

5. Think creatively about ways people can cooperate rather than clash. In every negotiation, there is a tension between the desire to compete and the desire to cooperate.

Be on the lookout for signals that support a cooperative environment. That's where the most creative solutions are born.

6. Take the spotlight off someone if he or she refuses to budge. Isolation tends to create movement. When you mediate a multiparty conflict, you'll often discover that one person insists on taking a hard-line approach, refusing to compromise and shooting down every solution presented.

The suggestion: Take the attention off the "last man (or woman) standing" and begin settling around that person. You'll find that the holdout starts to anxiously call and send e-mails, trying to get things going again. When his or her perceived power is neutralized, the balking negotiator quickly sees the value of compromise.

7. "Edit the script" to help people see their situation in a different light. People tend to get stuck in their positions because they're telling what happened from a narrow viewpoint and in a negative and hopeless tone. They *can't* see the situation any other way unless you help them to do so.

As the mediator, you can take a larger view that looks not at one party or the other "winning" but at both parties working toward a mutual goal. One way to do that is to *edit their script*. Retell their story about the dispute in a positive, forward-looking construction.

In that way, you literally give them the words to see their options in a new light.

8. Avoid the "winner's curse" by carefully pacing negotiations. Believe it or not, it's possible to reach a solution *too quickly*.

We all have an inner clock that lets us know how long a negotiation should take. When a deal seems too easy, a kind of buyer's remorse can set in. One or both parties may be left feeling that if things had moved more slowly, they might have cut a better deal. Don't rush the dance or the negotiation will fail.

Even when you know you can wrap up things quickly, it's to everyone's advantage to keep the negotiation proceeding normally, for a reasonable amount of time, before the inevitable settlement.

9. Realize that every conflict can't be solved. What if you've tried to help two warring factions find a fair solution, but you just can't reach that elusive goal? That can happen, and often does. Not every negotiation will have a win/win outcome. Not everyone can live together in harmony.

There are times when you just have to accept that both parties will leave the table equally unhappy. Isolate the participants if possible, and just move on.

Rage against the co-worker: 5 ways to calm angry employees

You are at the front lines when confronting angry employees; you typically have to deal with their raw rage. So, how can you handle angry employees' complaints without adding more stress to your day or opening the organization to legal liability? Use the following "Five A's" to deflect employee anger:

1. Abstain from interrupting. Let the other person have his or her say. Eventually, the employee has to take a breath, which helps you move to the second step.

2. Agree to the extent that you can. You don't have to agree on who's right and who's wrong, but you can agree that a problem exists or at least that the person is upset. Examples: "*I can see that you're upset,*" "*You sound angry about what's happened.*" Also, acknowledge the problem. Even if you think the person is overreacting, it's important to validate his or her perception of the situation. Show your empathy and concern

by saying "*I can understand why you're upset.*"

3. Apologize to the extent that you can. Know the difference between accepting responsibility and offering a sincere but blame-free apology. For example, it's not your fault that the company's health insurer denied the employee's claim, but you can still express your regret. Example: "*I'm sorry that happened to you.*"

4. Act within your authority. If you can solve the problem, promise that you will ... and follow through. In other situations, you may not have the power to change anything. But you can offer your understanding and forward the complaint (or direct the employee) to the appropriate person in the organization.

5. Assess the outcome. Take time later to reflect on the confrontation. Was the person calmer when you finished, or more upset? What did you say or do that helped the situation or made matters worse? Reflecting on your words, actions and outcomes will help you be more effective next time.