

GROUP LIFE
& HEALTH

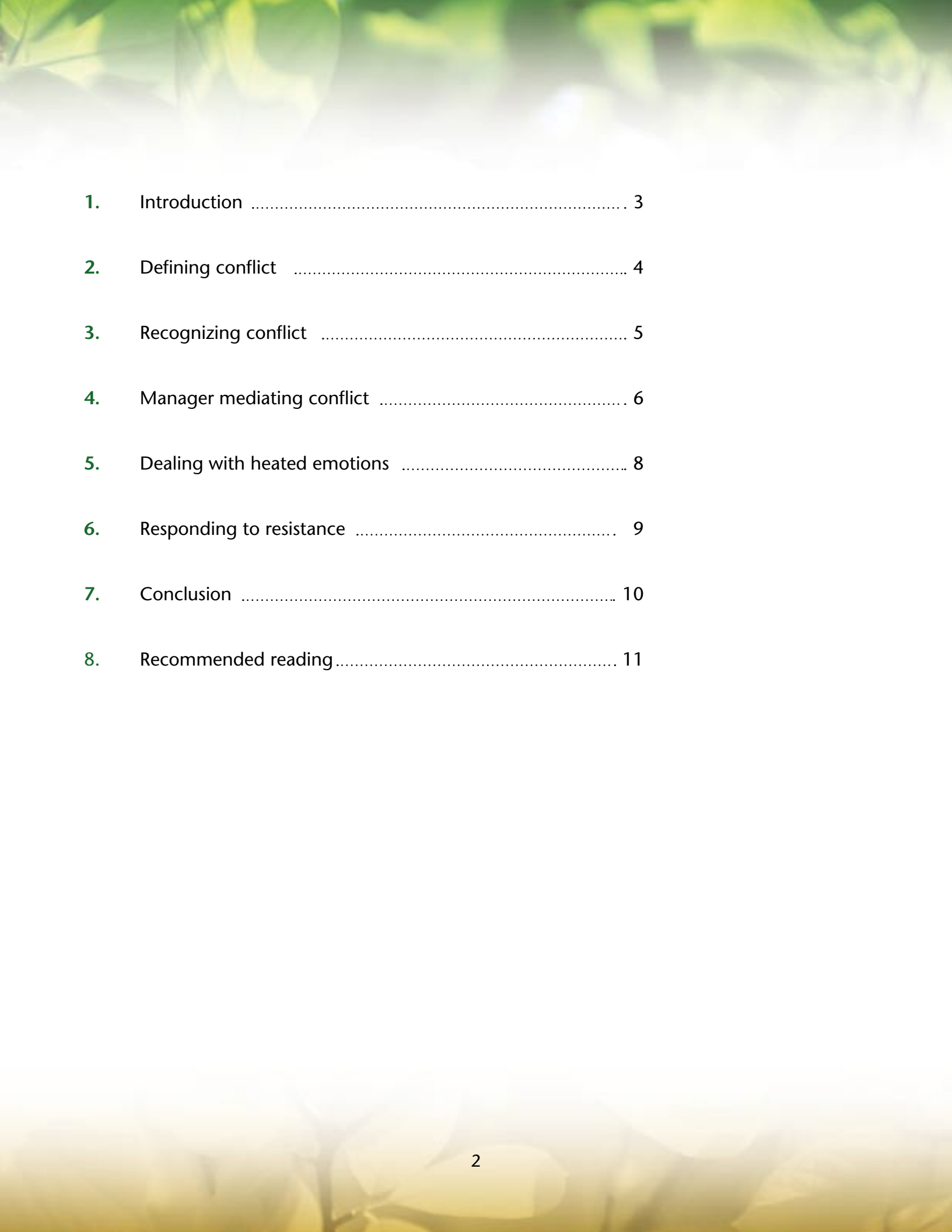
ONLINE EDUCATIONAL BOOKLET

MANAGING CONFLICT

Well.
And well worth it.



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Introduction

Workplace conflict can be deadly. It results in increased stress levels for almost everyone who comes in contact with it, whether or not they are directly involved. Workers dealing with the effects of stress are more likely to fuel existing conflict, since their ability to objectively deal with emotionally charged situations diminishes. To add to the complexity, conflict may become so ingrained in the procedures and daily interactions of an organization that it may blend into the background, so any steps to remedy the situation may not be obvious amidst the negativity.

If not managed quickly and effectively, a conflict can escalate as others are drawn into the dispute, spreading throughout the office and poisoning employee and customer relations. This can send absenteeism and disability rates through the roof, while morale, efficiency and productivity plummeting. When not handled effectively, conflict can escalate to the point of threats, intimidation, insults, harassment or even physical contact, such as punching or pushing.

Such situations force managers to focus their time and energy on the fallout caused by discord instead of organizational needs.

For employees, workplace conflict is stressful and unpleasant. This anxiety may spill over into other areas of life and disrupt, for example, personal relationships. Stress also affects the body and contributes to injury and illness.

On the other hand, conflicts that are handled effectively and promptly can be positive experiences for both employees and the organization. Managers can redefine roles, reassess communication channels and examine processes, and employees will enjoy a more harmonious workplace.

More information and assistance is available through Expert-Aide, a service that offers professional coaching and consultation for managers to help them deal with employees who are facing difficulties. Orientation sessions and online booklets are also available, as are referral services for employees who are facing difficulties that affect, or could affect, their job performance. Contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).

Defining conflict

Broadly, there are two kinds of workplace conflict: when people's ideas, decisions or actions relating directly to the job are in opposition, or when two people just don't get along. The latter is often called 'a personality clash'.

A conflict of ideas, or a dispute, on any aspect of business can often be productive if the parties involved are willing to 'brainstorm' solutions together. Sometimes, the compromise can be better for business than either of the original ideas. Conflict of this kind often generates better work practices and initiates positive changes that would otherwise never have occurred. Disputes are about facts.

Personality clashes, on the other hand, are very rarely productive and have little to do with facts. They're about emotions. A clash may start with a dispute on business practices and escalate to mutual loathing, or else the two people may have simply disliked each other from the beginning. This is the type of workplace conflict that's destructive for those involved, the workplace and the organization.

Most people affected by conflict describe a feedback loop. Each encounter in a conflicted relationship erodes trust and creates resentment, further fuelling the conflict and making disagreements even more likely.

Why such conflicts begin is hard to ascertain. They can result from a difference in values or personal goals or an organizational change. Personality, work styles, competencies and communication skills also play a role. Often people are competing with each other for prestige, promotion or power. When you have many different people working together, a manager faces many possible conflicts.

Recognizing conflict

It's important for managers to nip these conflicts in the bud, so to speak, but recognizing conflict in an organization is not always easy. Conflicts do not usually mean two people shouting at each other. It's much more subtle but there are signs. Watch for:

- Individuals avoiding eye contact
- People documenting or defending their ideas or actions
- Previously enthusiastic employees withdrawing from discussion or activities with certain individuals
- Work performance sliding
- A sudden increase in sick days
- An employee creating flimsy excuses to miss meetings
- Employees laying blame on each other
A sudden indifferent or "who gives a darn" attitude

Organizational leaders are responsible for creating a work environment that allows people to thrive. If disagreements, disputes and power struggles escalate into interpersonal conflict, then you must intervene immediately. In conflict-ridden situations, your mediation and negotiation skills are critical.

- **Do not** avoid the conflict, hoping it will go away. It won't. An unresolved conflict or interpersonal disagreement festers just under the surface in your work environment and bubbles to the surface at the worst possible moment. Turning the other cheek is not an option.
- **Do not** meet separately with people in conflict. If you allow each individual to tell their story to you, you risk polarizing them further. Each has a vested interest in making him or herself appear "right" if you place yourself as judge and jury.
- **Do not** believe the only people who are affected by the conflict are the participants. Everyone in your office and every person with whom the conflicting employees interact, is affected by the stress. People feel as if they are walking on egg shells in the presence of the antagonists. In some situation, people take sides and your workplace becomes divided.

The challenge is to implement procedures and policies that will properly manage the conflict rather than manage it, and to recognize that unresolved conflict leads to long-term stress in employees.

Manager mediating conflict

When stepping in to resolve a workplace conflict, a manager first needs to examine his or her attitude and thus set the tone for the mediation process. Follow these rules to establish a safe and respectful environment for all parties:

- Be objective. Validate both sides, even if you privately prefer one point of view.
- Be supportive. Use caring language and provide a non-threatening environment where people will feel safe to open up.
- No judging. Actively discourage judgments as to who is right and who is wrong. Don't ask "Why did you do that?" Ask "What happened?" and "How did you feel?"
- Work to steer the process, not the content. Use astute questioning. Encourage suggestions from participants. Offer options, not directives.
- Win/Win. Work towards a win situation for both sides. Turn opponents into problem-solving partners.

The mediation process need not be a confrontational situation if you use the following methods and processes.

Methods

- Define your mediator role as one to support both people "winning."
- Get agreement from both parties about a basic willingness to fix the problem.
- Let each person say what the problem is for them. Check with the other person to make sure they understand.
- Guide the conversations towards a joint problem-solving approach and away from personal attacks.
- Encourage them to look for answers where everybody gets what they need.
- Redirect "fouls" (name calling, put downs, sneering, blaming, threats, bringing up the past, making excuses, not listening, getting even). Where possible, you reframe the negative statement into a neutral description of a legitimate present time concern.

The Process

Open

Introductions and agreements. Warm up, explain the reasons for this process and outline an agenda if known.

Establish

- 1) Overview: What is the matter? Each person expresses their view of the conflict, the issues and their feelings.
- 2) Details: Here you want to get a clear picture of the situation. What is involved? Understand their needs and concerns. Clarify misperceptions and identify other relevant issues.

Don't jump straight into solutions. Simply collect information. Your role is to encourage empathy between the conflicted parties. Empathy is about rapport and openness and when it is absent, people are less likely to consider other people's needs and feelings. The best way to build empathy is to help each person feel that they are understood.

- Enquire about their needs in the situation.
- Enquire about their concerns, anxieties or difficulties.
- Find out their view of the needs and concerns of other relevant people affecting the situation.
- Ask general questions that encourage them to open up. For example, "How do you see it all?"
- Ask specific questions that will give you significant pieces of information, for example, "How much does it cost?"
- Explore hidden premises on which they build their thinking.

Tips:

- If they say "I can't" you might ask "What happens if you do?"
- If they say "They always..." you might ask "Are there any circumstances in which they don't?"
- If they say "It's not enough" or "It's too many," you might ask, "Compared to what?"

Move:

- 1) Where are they now? Identify areas of agreement and encourage willingness to move forward.
- 2) Negotiation: Focus on future action. How would they like it to be? What would that take? Develop options and build wins for everyone.

The mediator's role is to affirm, acknowledge and explore the problem and come up with viable options that make both sides feel they've "won."

- Don't ignore or deny their feelings
- Read the non-verbal as well as the verbal communications to assess feelings
- Check back with them about their feelings as well as the content even though they may only be telling you about the content. If they're not sure how they feel, ask them. "How do you feel about that? "How did that affect you?"
- Reflect back to them what you hear them to be saying so they can hear themselves.
- If you get it wrong, ask an open question and try again. For example, "How do you see the situation?"

Tips:

- Allow silences in the conversation
- Remember that active listening is a method of helping the other person focus below the words to the unresolved issues
- Notice sighs and body shifts. They usually indicate insight or acceptance. Pause before asking something like "How does it all seem to you now?"

Close:

Completion. Make plans for the future, including appointed time to review the agreement. Closing statements.

Dealing with heated emotions

If one of the conflicted parties starts to shout or turns their anger against you, DO NOT defend yourself at this point. It will inflame them further. Instead, let them know you're listening to what they are saying. Deal with the emotion first, acknowledge their viewpoint and move forward.

People shout because they don't think they're being heard. Make sure they know they are – that you are hearing how angry or upset they are. This usually diffuses the situation.

Acknowledge their side. This does not mean you agree with them, only that you are registering their viewpoint. For example, "I can see why the situation makes you angry."

Draw them out further. Gently explore with them if there is more behind the emotion.

Ask what could be done now to make it okay again. Move towards options for change or solution. Ask what they really want, or what they want now.

Tips:

- Don't act defensively
- Don't rise to the bait and retaliate
- Don't justify
- Use phrases such as "I can see how upset you are," "You feel you've reached your limit," "Have I got it right?"

Responding to resistance

When faced with a statement that has potential to create conflict, ask open questions to reframe resistance. Explore the difficulties and then re-direct discussion to focus on positive possibilities.

Explore

– clarify details

It's too expensive
Too many/much/little/few
I want the best

Compared to what?
Compared to what?
What would be best for you?

– find options

You can't do that around here
He/she would never...
They always...
We've tried that already
This is the only way to do it

What would happen if we did?
How can we find ways for it to happen?
Are there any times they don't?
What was the outcome?
Yes, that's an option. What else could we consider?

Redirect

– move to the positive

It will never work.
I won't...
It's a failure.
It's disastrous.
He's (she's) useless.
It's impossible.
I can't.
I don't want to.

What would it take to make it work?
What would make you willing?
How could it work?
What would make it better?
What is he (she) doing that is acceptable?
What would make it possible?
You can't see a way to do it at the moment?
What would you like?

– go back to legitimate needs and concerns

He's (she's) a hopeless case!
You fool! (and other insults)
How dare you do such a thing!
It should be done my way.
His/her place is a pig's sty!
He/she doesn't do their fair share

It's hard to see how to work with him (her)?
What do we need to do to sort this out?
What do you dislike about it?
What makes that seem the best option?
He/she puts a different emphasis on tidiness to you?
Where do you think his/her priorities may lie?

Conclusion

Conflict can be managed if you respond rather than react to it. Bickering and backbiting can be very frustrating, but it's important not to jump angrily into the fray. As we've seen, to successfully resolve conflicts, a manager must be prepared, tread gently and use equal parts caution and concern.

Unfortunately, not all conflicts can be resolved. There will be people who lack the emotional capacity to cope with the demands of stressful roles, or are involved in a conflict rooted in years of mistrust. These situations may be difficult, if not impossible to resolve.

Managers can reduce the possibility of conflicts by building a positive working climate of openness and trust where people respect individual differences and diverse viewpoints. In such an atmosphere, energy is directed to attaining job satisfaction and thus organizational goals.

And finally, remember your role as manager and mediator is to provide leadership, encourage the development of better communication, a more positive relationship and to facilitate change. In the end, it's up to the individuals involved to change their behaviours and attitudes.

For assistance with, or more information on, conflict resolution, Contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).

Recommended reading

The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A Practitioner's Guide

by Bernard Mayer and Bernard S. Mayer

The Promise of Mediation:

***Responding to Conflict Through Empowerment and Recognition
(The Jossey-Bass Conflict Resolution Series)***

by Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger

We Can Work It Out: Resolving Conflicts Peacefully and Powerfully

by Marshall B. Rosenberg PhD.

Face It: Recognizing And Conquering The Hidden Fear That Drives All Conflict At Work

by Art Horn

Way of Conflict: Elemental Wisdom for Resolving Disputes and Transcending Differences

by Deidre Combs

Resolving Conflicts at Work: A Complete Guide for Everyone on the Job

by Joan Goldsmith and Kenneth Cloke

The Joy Of Conflict Resolution:

Transforming Victims, Villains And Heroes In The Workplace And At Home

by Gary Harper

Dispute Resolution: Negotiation, Mediation, and Other Processes

by Stephen B. Goldberg, Frank E. A. Sander, Nancy H. Rogers

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In

by Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton

The Coward's Guide to Conflict:

Empowering Solutions for Those Who Would Rather Run Than Fight.

by Timothy Ursiny

Conflict Resolution

by Daniel Dana



Keeping our word is standard

