

HOW TO DETERMINE IF CONFLICTS ARE CONSTRUCTIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE

Clashes of opinion or personality are a fact of life in the workplace. Sometimes they're healthy and helpful, and sometimes, unfortunately, just the opposite. Learn how to differentiate between them well before the trouble begins.

It is inevitable that conflict will surface in the workplace. In the healthiest workplaces, it surfaces quite often. However, when it does, it serves to strengthen and energize the workplace rather than to drain and deplete it.

Healthy conflict allows ideas to be challenged so that more effective ways of doing things can be born. It enables people to learn about how their behavior is affecting others so that they can improve how they work as team members. Conflict can be a helpful process in a Magnetic Workplace.

However, as we've all experienced, it can be destructive. What makes the difference? What are the factors that differentiate the kind of conflict that attracts vs. that that does nothing but repel?

Some Basic *Do's* and *Don'ts*

Here are some "do's" and "don'ts" that will keep workplace conflict constructive.

1. ***Don't* attack the person; *do* attack the problem.**

Hitting below the belt and personally demeaning statements only serve to escalate the conflict. A person who feels put down is typically looking for a way to get even, and the retaliation only adds fuel to the fire. Instead of attacking a person, attack the problem. Mutually look at how you can both contribute to making things better.

2. ***Don't* try to win by causing someone else to lose; *do* use win-win strategies.**

The fact is, when you are able to score a "victory" by making someone else feel like a loser, it's not over! The solution is tenuous and temporary at best. However, when two people work together to find ways that each can get their needs met, these tend to be lasting solutions. Both can commit their energies to problem solution instead of trying to even the score.

3. ***Don't* use domination, intimidation or manipulation. *Do* use direct, assertive, honest and respectful discussion.**

Domination, intimidation and manipulation are win-lose strategies, designed to gain power and control of someone else. They do not work long term. They certainly do not build teamwork. You get the best results by making clear and direct statements that are respectful of both people's positions. You will be able to get much better cooperation when you are both honest and respectful.

4. *Don't create undercurrents that block problem solving. Do bring issues to the surface so that they can be solved and collaboration can occur.*

Many people do not like conflict and try to avoid it at all costs. However, they often let little resentments build. Growing resentments can block cooperation and can actually give rise to little passive-aggressive behaviors like sarcasm, avoidable delays, and talking behind someone's back. It is much more helpful to bring issues to the surface and talk about them in a respectful way so that some kind of action plan or solution can be resolved.

5. *Don't focus on your own agenda without concern for the other person. Do give each person the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of the other through active listening.*

Common "eyesight problems" in conflict are nearsightedness and tunnel vision. It's easy to focus only on what you want and need, without taking into account the legitimate concerns of the other person. Taking the time to talk with each other and to listen actively gives each person the opportunity to understand the problem more clearly and to put together a solution that can actually work.

Will your conflict be constructive or destructive? The choice is yours. It is a critical choice because of the outcomes that flow from that choice.

Use destructive methods, and individuals and subgroups will be polarized. Unity and trust will be destroyed. Energy will be drained.

Choose to be mature enough to put in practice win/win strategies, and you'll be rewarded with open trust, an atmosphere in which it's safe to risk and objective decision making and problem solving. Relationships will be energized and strengthened.

The choice is yours.

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