

STRATEGIES for MINDFUL LIVING

Courtesy of UAB Employee Assistance & Counseling Center

Resolving Coworker Conflicts

Coworker conflicts can be one of the most difficult forms of workplace stress. Understanding the nature of conflict, examining myths and learning simple conflict-resolution skills can reduce conflicts and their negative toll on your job satisfaction and productivity.

■ The Nature of Conflict

Workplace conflicts naturally emerge from the incompatible or opposing needs, wishes, external demands or perceived demands of others. Conflict between coworkers can be visible in the work environment or stay hidden from others. Conflicts frequently grow worse without resolution and can be costly if they appear irreconcilable.

Although often stressful, conflict at work is normal. When

managed and controlled, conflict in the workplace is beneficial because it can stimulate change and discovery, and increase productivity.

■ Myths About Workplace Conflict

• Myth #1: Conflict is Bad.

In the workplace, conflict is not inherently bad. It is usually a symptom, not a problem. It is a signal to do something to manage differences. What follows is a new outcome toward the goal of seeking harmony in the workplace and improving productivity.

• Myth #2: Conflict is Win-Lose.

Conflict is often mistakenly viewed as an undesirable contest of

wills and determination where one person wins and the other loses. This view reduces the potential benefits of conflict and can make it worse.

• Myth #3: Only Bad Employees Cause Conflict.

Difficult employees may contribute to conflict, but most workplace conflicts are between productive and dedicated employees. Problems in resolving conflicts, and inadequate approaches to conflict resolution, contribute to the belief that conflict must be a disciplinary matter.

■ Intervene Early

Because conflicts have the potential of becoming crises, early intervention is important. Once a crisis exists,



attitudes of those in conflict become rigid. Termination of the relationship becomes the goal and the risk of physical violence may exist. Consider these keys to conflict resolution:

- **Expect Conflicts:** Decide that conflicts will occasionally emerge in the discourse of human relationships. Don't fear conflict, rather, learn to spot its symptoms early and see opportunity in the resolution of conflict.
- **Practice Preventative Maintenance:** Practice talking about your relationship with your coworker. Avoid retreating to the safety of withdrawal, avoidance or the simplistic view that your coworker is a "bad person." These are defense mechanisms that prevent the resolution of conflict.
- **Frequently Discuss Four Conflict Parameters:** Ask, "Do we have any concerns about: 1) communication between ourselves, our team, or the supervisor; 2) our roles and duties; 3) needs and resources for doing our job; 4) the work environment — customer stress, politics in the organization, or expectations of our work unit." Make honesty a tool for conflict resolution. If you are a supervisor or team leader, model openness and reward it. Seek solutions to identified problems and follow up.
- **Get Leverage on Yourself:** When conflict between you and a coworker appears without resolution, it is time to get leverage. Ask to be held accountable for resolving the conflict.



This brings your performance evaluation into the equation, but without taking away your responsibility for resolving conflict. This is hard to do, but remarkable change can happen when you are held to task.

■ What the EACC Can Do

The UAB Employee Assistance & Counseling Center can help you resolve conflicts using different approaches depending on an assessment of your struggles with a coworker. An EACC staff member may begin by interviewing coworkers individually, or meet with you as a group before using goal-oriented approaches to resolution. Contact the EACC by visiting uab.edu/eacc to learn more. There is much to gain in resolving conflicts — your happiness, health and productivity.

— Adapted from *WorkExcel.com*