



# Book Managing Conflict at Work

## Understanding and Resolving Conflict for Productive Working Relationships

Clive Johnson and Jackie Keddy  
Kogan Page, 2010  
[Listen now](#)

- play
- pause

00:00  
00:00

### Recommendation

Office disagreements that become prolonged disputes can be frustrating to resolve and can cause your firm’s productivity and profitability to suffer. Mediation sessions can last for hours or days. During these sessions, participants may attack each other, curse the mediator or act in other unpleasant ways. Conflict resolution specialists can apply alternative dispute resolution methods to settle disagreements that might otherwise move to the courtroom. Mediators Clive Johnson and Jackie Keddy comprehensively detail the best practices for conflict management and resolution and provide knowledgeable advice about putting these concepts to work. *BooksInShort* recommends their tactics to HR managers, front-line managers and others who must squash office squabbles before they turn into protracted battles.

### Take-Aways

- Workplace disputes reduce productivity, damage morale and cost money.
- You must deal with discord; you cannot ignore it.
- Use “alternative dispute resolution” techniques to settle workplace conflicts.
- These techniques are preferable to costly, time-consuming litigation.
- To keep workplace clashes from recurring, learn all you can from the disputes you settle.
- Mediation requires willing participants; it will not succeed if one of the disputants has been dragged into the process.
- Companies should institute formal conflict management programs that eliminate the causes of workplace tensions and mitigate disagreements when they occur.
- A good mediator facilitates conversation and never offers advice.
- Few organizations invest sufficiently in conflict management programs.
- When battling employees trust their front-line managers, the possibility for a quick resolution is much greater.

### Summary

#### Conflict Is Everywhere

Discord can arise anywhere, including in offices across the globe. Workplace conflict is an enormous drag on productivity and profitability. Organizations in the United Kingdom spend almost £40 billion [approximately more than \$60 billion] annually to resolve clashes, and companies in the United States spend almost \$300 billion annually on employment disputes that move to litigation.

“Each resolution is a kind of minor miracle.”

Managers and other corporate personnel waste countless hours getting ready for formal hearings stemming from office disagreements. Workplace fights engender bad feelings that undermine the cooperative spirit that people need to work well together.

Workplace conflicts' typical triggers include paranoid feelings among employees, maladjusted workers and managers' inability to reduce this uncertainty among the members of staff about their future job status. When work brings people together, they generally get along well. After a while, however, a "pinch-crunch conflict cycle" develops. When employees feel their organization or their colleagues are violating their rights, that's a pinch. After a few pinches, an aggrieved worker will strike back at a perceived aggressor, and that's the crunch.

"In virtually every sphere of life, the need for mediation is on the rise."

When differences emerge between employees and tension escalates, a company may ask a third party – for example, a conflict resolution specialist – to cool off the situation. If no one acts, the disagreement may simmer and eventually boil over. An angry employee may file a grievance, which could lead to the need for a judgment and to a negative aftermath: more bitter feelings among staff members.

"Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), paranoia and narcissism...are more common in the workplace than might often be assumed."

To preclude litigation, managers turn to "alternative dispute resolution" (ADR). Its tactics include "conflict coaching," which helps disputants develop new perspectives about contentious issues; mediation, in which an objective third party tries to get everyone to agree to an acceptable settlement; and arbitration, in which the third party renders a decision.

## Conflict Management

Conflict management (CM) involves three major areas: "containment" – that is, mitigating minor problems before they escalate – "resolution" – that is, finding mutually acceptable solutions – and "monitoring" – that is, limiting the negative fallout from angry episodes. Conflict resolution options include these tactics:

- **"One-to-one" talks** – The disputants meet to resolve their differences.
- **"Direct approach"** – A third party adopts a parental role toward the disputants.
- **"Conflict coach"** – A professional helps disputants see the matter in a new light.
- **Third-party intervention** – Someone the individual disputants trust and respect tries to ease tensions.
- **"Collaborative legal process"** – Lawyers educate disputants regarding the potential costs if the matter moves to litigation.
- **"Arbitrator or tribunal panel"** – A professional imposes a judgment.
- **"Line manager"** – A supervisor takes on the role of arbitrator.
- **"Litigation"** – Going to court is costly but may be a necessary last resort.
- **Noninterference** – If you let the dispute run its course, it may never end.

"Managed correctly, an embryonic dispute may be quickly defused, avoiding significant time and effort that might have been expended had it escalated further."

As managers unravel disputes, they should consider these questions:

- What caused the dispute?
- What is the real problem?
- What do the disputants want?
- How do they conceptualize the problem?
- How can the parties move past their anger?
- Would intervention by managers, mediators or coaches help?
- What resolution is possible?
- What legal ramifications loom?
- Which outside resources, such as CM professionals, could be helpful?

"Mediation and conflict coaching can be emotionally exhausting."

Once CM policies are in place, managers must monitor the situation to be sure new CM rules remain relevant.

## The "RESOLVE" Approach

The RESOLVE model is an ideal methodology for eliminating workplace conflict. Conflict management specialists use this approach in their coaching efforts and alternative dispute resolution activities, including mediation. This tactic consists of seven steps:

1. **"Review, rules and roles"** – Use the three R's of mediation. In the review phase, disputants state their side of the story. Rules are mediation guidelines that ensure an efficient ADR process – for example, making sure everyone gets the opportunity to speak. Roles spell out the mediator's function and the purpose of mediation.
2. **"Emotions"** – Disputes provoke strong feelings; acknowledge those emotions as you work toward resolution.
3. **"Summarize"** – Regularly update everyone's understanding of the situation.
4. **"Outcome"** – Disputants have to envision specific results that they want to achieve through mediation.
5. **"Learning"** – Organizations that fail to learn from going through the dispute resolution process will continue to see conflict in the ranks.
6. **"Value"** – Mediators must demonstrate the high value they place on each disputant's contribution to the resolution. Praise someone who offers to compromise on a specific point. Mediators should express their appreciation for any progress – for example, by saying, "Look how far you've come since starting this

conversation today.”

7. **“Engage”** – Individual disputants who are not actively engaged in the mediation process are unlikely to buy into any resolution agreement.

## Managers Can Prevent Disputes

Proactive managers can defuse altercations between employees before they turn into knock-down, protracted fights. They must act during the “golden hour,” that is, the brief period before events blow up. The way managers communicate to disputants makes all the difference.

“An important role for mediators is to be able to listen without interruption, unless intervention is required to help the discussion move forward.”

Good listening is critical. It involves not just hearing the words people speak, but deciphering their nonverbal messages, including listening “between the words” and reading body language. Managers must ask astute questions to help combatants resolve their differences. The “TED-PIE” questioning approach is particularly useful: “Tell me, Explain to me, Describe to me – Previously, In detail and Exactly.” The term “previously” concerns the relationship the disputants shared before their disagreement. Managers should engage the disputants in a manner that encourages them to communicate openly and honestly.

“Learning...is the most important element for ensuring that organizations can achieve the greatest benefit from the experience of resolving a particular dispute.”

Managers must demonstrate empathy, sincerity and compassion. They also must be able to create trust, and exhibit respect for the disputants. A manager may act in several different roles, including the following:

- **Counselor** – Acts as a “sounding board.”
- **Facilitator** – Supplies whatever the parties need to attain their goals.
- **Observer** – Provides an objective viewpoint.
- **Mentor** – Helps disputants come to an understanding of what they must do to move beyond their disagreement.
- **Expert** – Provides advice on disposition based on his or her special expertise.
- **Coach** – Helps disputants develop new mind-sets regarding the problem.

## CM Training

Organizations that are serious about implementing proactive, effective CM strategies should train their front-line managers in dispute resolution and mediation techniques. Help managers understand how they should communicate with the employees they supervise. Poor manager-employee communication frustrates all involved and causes many workplace disputes.

“Many conflicts between individuals and teams aren’t only healthy, but may be valuable.”

CM training must include a consideration of the regulatory environment and an education on how CM aids any organization’s productivity and well-being. CM students learn how workplace conflicts originate, how to identify common “conflict triggers” and how to manage the impact of disputes. Managers and employees benefit from training in the prevention of workplace conflicts.

## Mediation

If neither managers nor other intermediaries are able to resolve a dispute, the organization should move quickly to settle things in a more formal manner. If the company fails to do so, the dispute may escalate and move into the public domain, with all of the attendant negative consequences, such as bad publicity. At this point, mediation may be a worthwhile ADR option.

“To be effective in managing conflict, managers need to be aware of the capacity they have to unknowingly contribute to the onset and growth of disputes.”

As a manager, if you decide to use mediation to solve a staff disagreement, seek a contract from the disputants wherein they agree to specific mediation rules. Mediators should plan the number of mediation sessions, the time they will take, the resources they’ll need (like whiteboards or flip charts), seating arrangements, and so on. Shuttle mediation, in which disputants sit in different rooms and proposals move back and forth between them, can be useful, though exhausting. Remember the role mediators serve:

- They are not there to determine the facts, but to allow disputants to air their differences.
- They serve as facilitators to further negotiations.
- They provide the structure and guidance to keep a conversation on track.
- They listen far more than they speak.
- They seek a practical solution that works for all parties.

“Feelings are arguably the most difficult influence to unravel in a dispute, not least because the reason an emotion has been triggered may not be clear even to the person it affects.”

The disputants should be able to regard mediators as sincere, objective and fair to both sides, so choose your mediator carefully. Mediators should keep the disagreeing parties from putting them into inappropriate positions. Disputants may ask the mediator, “What do you think we should (do), based on your experience?” The mediator is not there to give advice. He or she should explain to the disputants that mediation is a nondirectional exercise. A wise mediator might turn the tables on disputants by responding: “How do you think I might answer this?”

“Litigation is rarely satisfactory, either for a plaintiff or a defendant, costing significant time and money.”

Mediators must shut down mediation if it becomes clear that the process is not helpful. For example, the mediator may decide that coaching could be more useful. If mediation and other ADR approaches do not resolve the problem, litigation may become necessary. All parties must understand that litigation usually turns out to be a costly and time-consuming affair.

### Eliminating Workplace Disputes

Any organization’s CM strategy should focus on dealing with workplace disputes when they occur, and on reducing and eliminating the causes of such disputes. By promoting teamwork and a cooperative work spirit, managers can reduce the likelihood that the people they supervise will contend angrily with one another.

“Sometimes, ‘agreeing to disagree’ is a satisfactory outcome.”

As you plan your conflict management strategy, ensure that trust and mutual respect are bedrock values in your firm. When battling employees trust their front-line managers, the possibility for a quick resolution is much greater. Workplace disputes will occur, even in trustworthy companies. Organize your conflict resolution structure so that all unresolved disputes move quickly and automatically to the appropriate intermediaries, like coaches or other ADR professionals. Coordinate all CM strategies with your HR department.

“Both parties must want to achieve an outcome for any attempt at a resolution to succeed.”

Monitor your CM activities. Measure their results. Update your CM policies regularly and evaluate your CM training. Determine how well your various ADR approaches work in practice. Make sure that you have a ready network of CM professionals, including coaches and mediators, available and ready to step in when you need them.

### About the Authors

Business consultant, trainer and coach **Clive Johnson** and consultant and mediator **Jackie Keddy** are the co-founders of the International Conflict Management Forum and The Janus Partnership.

---