Book Win at Work!

The Everybody Wins Approach to Conflict Resolution

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Wiley, 2010
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Recommendation

Whether your office has just a few conflicts or enough juicy drama to provide the script for a scandal-filled television show, organizational consultant Diane L. Katz knows what you need to do to transform negative interactions into positive exchanges. "The Working Circle," her simple eight-step process, can help you handle workplace conflict. Katz's book presents numerous real examples of resolved conflicts to show how to use her method. *BooksInShort* recommends these clear case histories and her easy-to-read guidelines to those who want to transform a contentious workplace – or avoid having one in the first place.

Take-Aways

- Conflict at work can be "destructive" or "constructive."
- Constructive differences can create an environment of innovation and excitement. Destructive arguments distract staffers from their work and their goals.
- Poorly structured jobs, managers who can't handle disagreements and office cultures that reward aggressive behavior all feed destructive clashes.
- Beware of individuals who incite discord, from "loners" to "know-it-alls."
- Dispute resolution is easier with a collaborative management decision-making style.
- Use "The Working Circle" system to resolve conflict in eight planned steps:
- Assess the situation, decide what you can and can't negotiate, recall lessons from past experiences, make a plan, consider its effect, revise it and implement it.
- Try to understand your own conflict resolution style.
- Typical styles include "attacking, confronting, problem solving, compromising" and "withdrawing." Problem solving works best.
- Don't automatically try to resolve issues between your employees. Offer to mediate and make the final decision. Suggest a step-by-step approach to finding a solution.

Summary

Conflict: "Destructive" or "Constructive"?

All workplaces have conflicts. These disagreements can be destructive and can distract you and your co-workers from your goals, or they can be constructive and encourage creativity, improvement, innovation and problem solving. Destructive conflict stems from:

- Poorly designed jobs that cause workers to compete or feel overwhelmed.
- Laborious tasks, such as the need to fill out reams of forms.

- Leaders who don't handle conflict well or managers who can't control their anger.
- Staff training that offers lessons management never implements.
- Reward systems that emphasize combativeness – for example, complainers end up with the best assignments and choicest offices.
- Company policies that don't encourage truthfulness. If employees can't or won't speak up about problems, conflict can grow.
- Corporate cultures where workers blame others for their mistakes.
- Problem-causing employees who are just plain trouble. They are the butt of jokes and the topic of office gossip, and no one knows how to handle them.

Conflict Creators

The types of individuals who incite conflict include:

- **"The pot-stirrer"** – Routinely spreads gossip, inaccurate information and rumors.
- **"The loner"** – Shuts others out, won't listen, and feels frustrated, unheard and unhappy.
- **"The pleaser"** – Does whatever the boss wants, manipulates others and brews mistrust.
- **"The know-it-all"** – Claims to know everything.
- **"The chosen one"** – Acts as if he or she has a unique relationship with the boss.
- **"The wet blanket"** – Never has anything positive to say.
- **"The 'my porridge is too hot' client"** – Is never satisfied. Workers who deal with such clients become frustrated and could be accused of poor customer service.
- **"The 'I've got an excuse for everything' worker"** – Has a reason for any error.
- **"The whiner"** – Is never happy and always complains.

Managers Can Cause or Inflame Conflicts

A moody manager sets his or her workers on edge, since they must worry about how their boss's ever-changing frame of mind might affect them. Managers who gossip or joke about one staffer to another impede collaboration and undermine productivity. Supervisors stall creativity when they insist that workers obtain their approval for every move, and managers who can't delegate discourage their employees' initiative.

Eight Steps to Conflict Resolution

"The Working Circle" method of resolving conflicts can help managers deal constructively with disagreements. It is made up of eight questions that you can revisit as needed:

1. **"What's the situation?"** – Take a mental snapshot of the conflict, and review it clearly and unemotionally. When did it start? Who's involved and who's affected? Who will the outcome help or hurt? What caused the matter to grow to its current size? Must you meet any deadlines? Who should help decide the result?
2. **"What's negotiable?"** – Could you compromise on something if necessary?
3. **"What's nonnegotiable?"** – What is inflexible in this situation, in terms of other staffers, time frames, documentation, resources, tasks and communication?
4. **"What have I learned from previous experiences?"** – Dig into your history. If you ever faced a similar situation, review how it ended. Past mistakes offer meaningful lessons for the present.
5. **"How do I feel about the situation?"** – What is your sense about the people involved? Are you qualified to create and follow a plan? Do you have enough data? Will you gain from the result?
6. **"What's my game plan?"** – Using the information you've gathered so far, come up with a plan of action. But don't implement it yet – first, you have two more questions to answer.
7. **"What transformations will the game plan bring?"** – How will your plan's outcome affect you and your relationships with those involved? How might this improve your self-esteem and change your ability to handle future conflict?
8. **"Will these changes ultimately be positive?"** – You should be able to answer this quickly in light of the other questions you've already addressed.

The Working Circle in Action

Kim is a senior associate at a consulting company. She loves her job and enjoys the traveling it requires. Tony, a fellow senior associate, intimidates her. When they attend meetings together, Kim gradually becomes quieter and lets Tony lead. He happily takes over and often leaves Kim out of the discussion. As he chats on about his ideas, Kim often wonders why she bothers to come to these meetings at all. Gradually, the situation deteriorates. After Tony starts to delegate demeaning tasks to Kim, she realizes she must do something. She considers her situation in light of the Working Circle's eight questions:

1. **Kim examines the facts** – Kim has worked with Tony for a year. He's been at the firm longer and is more analytical, but she is better at solving client problems. If Kim does nothing, Tony will take more authority. Their boss rarely meets with them and hates to hear about problems.
2. **Kim decides what's negotiable** – Kim is willing to split the workload evenly with Tony, and she is glad to let him take some credit for certain accomplishments, as long as they share the final credit evenly. Kim isn't sure if she wants to keep working with Tony. The company will make new assignments at the end of the fiscal year, so Kim is considering asking for a new partner.
3. **Kim identifies what's nonnegotiable** – She knows she should lead with clients half the time, while Tony stays in the background. She refuses to let Tony take credit for her work. Kim prefers to share the workload with Tony, but she doesn't want him to delegate tasks to her. She wants her clients and boss to treat her and Tony as a team, and she feels Tony should see her as a teammate.
4. **Kim explores lessons from the past** – This took Kim a while. Finally, she remembered that when she was 16, three girls in her gym class frequently teased her in the locker room. Kim began to dread school and worried for hours about how to stop their harassment. One day, she encountered one of the three girls alone in the locker room, looking for something on the floor. Kim asked, "Did you lose something?" She offered to help, and the girl looked up, surprised, and

said, "I can't find my bracelet." Kim joined her and quickly found the bracelet. The girl was thrilled. After that, the three girls no longer taunted Kim. They made a few minor jokes now and then, but the bullying never returned to its original level. Kim realized that she had learned an important lesson – not to avoid bullies and give them the upper hand, but to treat them like equals. Now she knew how to deal with Tony.

5. **How does Kim feel about her situation now?** – Kim was intimidated by Tony but now feels that, after answering these initial questions, she is ready to develop a plan of action.

6. **Kim creates her plan** – On her next business trip with Tony, she plans to talk with him about the issues that bother her. She will not confront him but will approach him in a friendly way and stand firm until he understands that they are equal teammates. Kim will tell him what she feels they can discuss in front of clients and what should remain between the two of them. Instead of rehashing their past, which could make Tony defensive, Kim plans to talk about changes to implement on their next project. Instead of anticipating how Tony may respond, Kim focuses on what she wants to say and when and how she will say it. She will make eye contact, be firm and avoid accusing Tony of any misbehavior. Her goal is to be assertive and make her needs known.

7. **What change will Kim's plan bring?** – After Kim designed her plan, she stopped and reflected. If she were clear, professional and assertive with Tony, she would gain an equal role. She would feel newfound self-confidence, be more relaxed around clients, and win more respect from her manager, teammates and Tony. Were these the changes she wanted? Yes!

8. **Will Kim's changes bring a positive end result?** – This is Kim's final check before implementing her plan. She reviewed her answers to the first seven questions. She imagined being more comfortable in meetings and gaining greater recognition.

> "Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. It just is. We can't avoid it; it emerges in every aspect of our lives, every single day, to a greater or lesser extent."

You, too, can visualize the changes you want. When you do, they become more likely. Use question eight to motivate yourself and look toward the future. You can't predict what will happen, but you can prepare by visualizing possible results.

Your Conflict Management Style

If you know your conflict management style, you can improve it, shift to a different style in circumstances when your approach doesn't work and deal more effectively with others who have different techniques. Which of these conflict resolution styles fits you?

- **"Attacking"** – Those who use this style toss out angry accusations and rarely solve problems. This tactic allows you to vent your anger, but doesn't cure anything. Unfortunately, it also causes others either to withdraw or to attack back. Some workers may respond by saying what they think you want to hear, while others will feel alienated and will believe you don't welcome their comments. This style is rarely helpful. It may work in the short term, but it is not an effective long-term approach.
- **"Confronting"** – This style is popular among straightforward "in your face" managers who directly identify problematic issues – but who don't welcome give and take. To them, assigning blame is more important than resolving the issue or learning from it. Treating people this way can cause them to proclaim their innocence, become defensive or fight with you. Those you accuse can feel alienated, surprised or put on the spot. Such an approach leaves no room for creative problem solving. It may work when being assertive is the only way to get someone's attention. Once the person focuses on the issue, switch to the problem-solving style.
- **"Problem Solving"** – This is the best method to use. You make others feel valued and included, encourage creativity, and embrace fresh ideas. You see clashes as positive opportunities for change. This tactic elicits mutual respect and empowerment, and it promotes creativity. The Working Circle is based on this approach and can be used in all kinds of situations – in highly charged scenarios where a lot is at stake, and even in cases of long-standing conflicts.
- **"Compromising"** – Even if they aren't exactly happy with the result, some supervisors concede elements of their argument just to avoid conflict. This style dodges additional fighting, but the person who makes the deal may feel shortchanged and unsatisfied. If this is your main tactic for solving problems, your staff may view you as being wishy-washy or too nice, and they may also believe they can manipulate you. Compromising does encourage people to offer creative ways to resolve conflict, but if you compromise too much, you may walk away feeling uncomfortable.
- **"Withdrawing"** – If this is your style, you probably remain upset after a conflict. You ponder what you want to say, but you hold back to avoid confrontation. You discuss the problem with your co-workers and friends, but never with the person involved. Then, when you go to bed, your mind fills with things you should have said. When managers withdraw, their staffers never know what matters to them or when they're upset. Over time, this style can lead to resentment.

Finding the Right Balance

The best approach balances the more stereotypically masculine attitude of attacking with the more stereotypically feminine trait of withdrawing. Doing too much at either extreme rarely works. A person who uses a more masculine approach will say, "Pay me or I'm gone."

> "If you keep wishing the problem maker would change, I assure you it would be more productive to believe that you will win the lottery."

A person on the feminine extreme will say, "I don't want to be a bother." Of course, most men and women don't fit either extreme. Try to balance your conflict resolution approach, regardless of your gender.

Guidelines for Managers

Don't automatically try to resolve issues between your employees. When you hear complaints, first absorb the information and thank the person, but don't offer an opinion. Say that nothing will happen until the other person shares his or her side of the story. After you hear both sides, encourage your staff members to resolve the situation themselves. Offer to mediate and be the final decision maker. Don't find the solution for them, but suggest that they use a measured, planned, step-by-step approach.

About the Author

Diane L. Katz heads The Working Circle, a consulting company. She has a master's degree from Columbia University and a doctorate in conflict resolution from Union Institute.