

## Ethics Corner:

### Resolving Workplace Conflicts

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Workplace conflict wears many faces. Consider the following situations:

- A vendor requested to work with Sal instead of Dan. Management approved the decision, but when Dan found out he confronted Sal and accused him of stealing the account. Dan and Sal haven't spoken since.
- Tom and Betty had a disagreement so long ago that no one even remembers who said what or why it was said. Both employees do their jobs well, but they communicate only when necessary, and bristle when they attend the same meeting.
- Terry has a great sense of humor and a talent for turning a phrase. Sometimes, though, the humor has a biting edge that hurts people's feelings.

Dan's conflict with Sal was explosive and direct, while Tom and Betty's simmers constantly in the background. Terry's stinging comments may not even be detected as a source of conflict. But conflicts like these have a way of permeating the workplace, affecting many more people than those involved in the initial dispute.



For example, you can be sure everyone knows you should never invite both Tom and Betty to the same lunch. And people who are hurt or made uneasy by Terry's jokes simply learn to avoid him. In Sal and Dan's office, co-workers pressured to "choose sides" will soon divide into uncooperative factions.

Unrecognized or unresolved, conflict in the workplace causes stress, alienation, and lack of cooperation. The resulting negative atmosphere impacts productivity and morale, contributes to illness and absenteeism, and in the long run can affect employee turnover and our company's reputation. If conflict is allowed to escalate, it can result in costly and time consuming legal battles, and even in violent outbursts.

Conflict is bound to occur in every workplace. Learning and applying some conflict resolution communication strategies can help you to resolve conflict before it becomes too big to handle.

#### How Do You Handle Conflict?

Think about how you feel when people disagree in your presence, or when you are confronted. Do you withdraw from conflict? Do you deny the issue, or try to rationalize away the feelings with facts? Perhaps you're someone who always gives in just to end the argument, or you feel you need to force your opinion

on others. Whatever your attitude, you need to understand it before you can be effective in dealing with conflict. If you take an honest look and don't like what you see, you can change the outcome of the conflict if you are willing to change your behavior.

Whether you know it or not, your workplace has its own conflict personality. Some office cultures just smile and pretend conflict doesn't exist. Others may allow the "bullies" to take control while leaving others to quietly stew, or plot revenge. Still others resolve disputes by pulling rank or "going by the book," ignoring the personalities and realities of the situation. In too few workplaces is conflict recognized as inevitable but manageable. People can usually reach an equitable agreement that prevents escalation if they deal with conflict directly and honestly.

#### Creative Conflict: Fighting Fair

Most people involved in conflict want to solve the problem; they just may not have the skills to do it. Here are some strategies to keep in mind when dealing with conflict.

- Deal with issues as soon as possible when they arise. The longer a conflict remains unresolved, the more likely it is to explode. It's much harder to discuss old business than to focus on immediate and specific issues.
- Make a commitment to solving the problem. A commitment means you are ready to own your part of the conflict and take steps to resolve it. Be ready to change your behavior if need be.
- Understand your own feelings, thoughts, and perceptions around the issue so that you can communicate your position clearly. Blame, name-calling, or put-downs are not helpful in resolving conflicts.
- Discuss the issue in the right setting. For example, wait until tempers are cool, then meet in "neutral territory".
- Focus on the issue, not on the other person. The more specific you are about the issue to be addressed, the more likely it is to be resolved.
- Listen to and respect the other person's position even if you do not agree with it. Make sure you are really hearing others and not just listening for what you expect to hear from them. What is their goal or interest in resolving the issue? What do they really want?
- Explore and create options for solving the problem that are mutually agreeable to all parties. When people really hear and understand both sides of an issue, a win-win solution is often possible.
- If you have a conflict with a specific person, talk to that person about it, not to others in the office. If co-workers come to you with problems about others, give them the same advice! Gossip fuels conflict. It does nothing to resolve it.

#### How Do These Guidelines Apply to the People in Our Opening Examples?

- Dan could evaluate his feelings about losing the account. Instead of confronting Sal with accusations, it would be appropriate for Dan to meet with Sal, and perhaps their manager, to explain why he was so angry and what he hoped would happen in the future.
- It's unlikely that Tom and Betty can ever discuss what happened so long ago. But if they commit to resolving the issue, they can begin by honestly and openly discussing any recent behavior that has fueled the grudge.

- Terry doesn't realize his "jokes" sting because no one ever told him. A simple statement such as "Terry, when you make remarks about my filing system, it really hurts my feelings. I want you to stop it," is a good start toward helping him to understand the impact of his remarks.

The more you practice "fighting fair" the easier it will be to come up with creative solutions. The good news is that every positive interaction builds better relationships in the workplace. In time, your workplace will experience the effects of direct, positive communication instead of the negative effects of unresolved conflict.

#### Our Commitment

There are many good reasons why Northrop Grumman is committed to reducing conflict in the workplace. Reducing conflicts in the workplace promotes a positive atmosphere. Studies show that more than one-third of a manager's time is spent dealing with and resolving workplace conflict. When conflict is reduced, this time can be spent on more positive activities. Reducing conflict also reduces the chances of conflict erupting into violence.

### Conflict Resolution

#### Q & A

- Q:** *One of our co-workers is easily upset and often loses her temper. She always apologizes later but her outbursts are upsetting. What should I do?*
- A:** The next time it happens ask to speak to her privately when she's calmed down. Explain how her outbursts make you feel. Be specific and speak for yourself, not for the rest of the office.
- Q:** *I don't agree with how my boss is handling a situation. We've discussed it in the office and I know others think I'm right. This isn't the first time this has happened. Should I confront my boss about it?*
- A:** Confronting your boss is very different from discussing the issue. Take some time to evaluate your position and why you think your approach is correct. Don't bring up "old news" about what's happened in the past unless it's really relevant to the situation now. If you communicate directly and specifically about the issue, you might change your boss's mind. Even if that doesn't happen, at least your boss will understand your position.
- Q:** *A man in the next office doesn't get along with one of my co-workers. At first they were just having loud conversations, but lately the other man has made threats. Several of us were thinking of meeting with him and telling him to stop. How should we handle this?*
- A:** This is a good example of why it's important to resolve conflict as soon as possible. It sounds as though this disagreement has already escalated to the point where violence is a possibility. Report this situation to your management, HR Generalist, or Business Conduct Officer, who will take appropriate action to resolve the issue.