

## **How to Defuse Conflict at Work**

*By David Sarkus, MS, CSP  
April 11, 2000*

*Here's help for handling an angry employee*

In today's very dynamic organizations that rely heavily on trust and communication, it's more important than ever to resolve conflict that gets in the way of progress. Here are some steps and strategies for avoiding non-productive conflict in your organization:

### **Focus on the issue**

Before you speak with another person or group about an existing conflict, keep in mind that your perspective may not be as objective as you would like to believe. Give yourself time to let go of disruptive emotions so you can approach the other person with respect. This allows you to maintain your dignity while preserving the other person's as well.

Consider temporarily giving up your position of thinking, at least for the period of time it will take to reach an initial agreement. Don't contemplate alternatives. As difficult as it may seem, put aside personal differences and focus on the issue and the common cause shared within the organization. With safety, this should be easy to do.

### **Meet on neutral ground**

Sometimes it's helpful to choose a location that's not considered your 'turf' or theirs, particularly if there's a lot of tension. Go to a break area, a conference room, someone else's office, or even out to lunch.

Also, consider using a facilitator if the conflict is very intense. Remember to leave enough time to get through the process without feeling rushed.

## **Stick to the facts**

It's often better to describe what actions have been observed rather than telling someone about their attitude.

Describe behaviors that have occurred, not personality issues or characteristics.

Be specific about what you've observed. Here's an example: You watch as Joe, a maintenance associate, abruptly walks out of a steering committee meeting. You know that something is wrong. Later, you approach Joe and ask him if something was bothering him at the meeting.

You let him know that you saw him walk out of the meeting and that you were a bit concerned. Let Joe know that this is only your opinion by saying, "I saw you leave and I'm a bit concerned . . ." Emphasize that this is only your opinion.

Joe says that he's upset because the new fall protection equipment that's been discussed should have arrived over a month ago, and he feels his safety and that of his co-workers is being compromised. What Joe doesn't know is that the manufacturer and the distributor are in conflict and design issues had to be addressed. Communications regarding this delay were poorly handled. Though Joe is still a bit upset, he now believes that there are 'acceptable' alternatives. In fact, he had already 'brainstormed' several of them with his co-workers.

## **Listen up**

It's important to hear others first. Listening is vital to resolving conflict, it's 'the great equalizer.' Emotionally, many people just need to vent before they're able to accept the viewpoint of another. By listening, you demonstrate that what someone has to say is important ? important enough to 'really listen.'

While listening, don't allow your mind to wander in order to prepare your next thought or position. Concentrate on what is being said, and what the person is doing while they speak.

### **Work for a win-win**

Joe was disturbed about the absence of fall protection, in particular about the units on back-order. Once his concerns were laid out on the table, the issue became clear and alternatives were addressed. In fact, guardrails were added at the work site and fall protection from another organization was borrowed until the new equipment arrived.

### **Follow through and follow up**

Follow through on proposed solutions to make sure they are acceptable and appropriate. Conflict and tension may still be present if solutions are not further addressed. From time to time, check back and ask questions that allow for more communication about the solution. This is an important part of resolving conflict. If the conflict is large, take time to celebrate in some small way and let go of the past.

### **Be ready**

How individuals or groups react to conflict can vary, and you must be ready to deal with each response. Some groups or people want the resolution to be their own way or no way at all. Others avoid any form of perceived conflict and deny that there is a problem. Some simply give in even if the resolution is not acceptable to them. And some individuals are willing to take a loss, compromising if they feel they must.

To summarize, the best approach to resolving conflict is to use ideas from both parties to develop a solution that is better than what individuals could have contributed on their own. And do this in a non-threatening manner.

Fear, a potent ingredient in conflict, brings unrest and leads to frustration.

This affects communication at home and at work. Fear also impacts performance in terms of productivity.

David J. Sarkus, MS, CSP, is a health and safety consultant specializing in behavior-based interventions and safety management evaluations. Based in Monongahela, PA, Dave can be reached at (724) 379-6439; [david@davidsarkus.com](mailto:david@davidsarkus.com); [www.davidsarkus.com](http://www.davidsarkus.com).