

HOW TO TURN CONFLICT INTO GAME-CHANGING OUTCOMES



Committee of 200 Contributor

Leadership Strategy

We are female leaders committed to advancing women in business.

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While most agree that conflict has no place in change management, we would be short sighted to overlook its potential presence or fail to plan for it. Workplace conflict can occur at any time, not just during periods of change, and often stems from differing interests, beliefs, or personalities. In fact, diversity of thought and perspective is something we all share, and when stress and emotions are involved, conflict becomes almost inevitable.

Conflict, when managed effectively, can lead to opportunities and breakthroughs. When diverse opinions are voiced, better decisions are made. Paradigm shifts, creativity, and innovation often arise as we navigate hurdles and find new, sometimes disruptive, solutions. However, when conflict escalates unchecked, it can damage morale, erode company culture, and fracture even the most high-performing teams.

So, how do we channel conflict for its potential benefits without allowing it to escalate into something unmanageable and destructive? The key lies in planning ahead: anticipating conflict before it arises, guiding it constructively in the moment, and reflecting on the lessons learned for the future.

PHASE ONE: STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE TO PREVENT UNNECESSARY CONFLICT

Build Openness and Transparent Communication

Creating a culture of honest, direct communication grounded in trust, mutual respect, and commitment is a powerful way to diffuse tension before it sets in. When leaders model transparency, humility, and vulnerability, it sets the tone for others to follow. Encourage team members to raise concerns, voice their thoughts, and embrace disagreement as an opportunity for growth. Integrate open dialogue and differing opinions into team communications, making them a regular part of meetings and work processes.

TIP: Encourage the use of first-person statements (“I” and “we”) rather than second-person (“you”) messages. This shift in mindset fosters accountability over blame and keeps conversations focused on solutions. It’s about shared ownership, not criticism.

Drive Employee Engagement

Research shows that employees with strong workplace connections are more productive, creative, and collaborative. They are also more satisfied with their jobs, less susceptible to burnout, and less likely to leave. Encourage these relationships by emphasizing shared experiences and interests: integrate

personal touchpoints into introductions and onboarding and create opportunities to connect over common interests and hobbies. Additionally, provide spaces for downtime and connection, such as offsite team building activities and regular breaks.

TIP: A highly effective tool for promoting employee engagement is to create cross-functional teams that support priorities spanning multiple areas of the business. This encourages employees to adopt an enterprise-wide perspective, fostering collaboration and the creation of shared visions and goals that drive breakthrough performance.

Don't Sidestep Conflict

When "let's take this offline" is heard more often than "you're still on mute," it may be a sign that unresolved tensions are brewing. Pay close attention to how employees or team members are engaging, and be mindful of any underlying friction. Learn to read the room—knowing when to encourage open conversations for collaboration and when it's more appropriate to have a side conversation.

TIP: Many people feel anxious at the prospect of conflict, often avoiding difficult but necessary conversations. Understanding and normalizing open dialogue is an important first step. Celebrate small wins and offer support when someone speaks up, especially if they voice a differing opinion. Over time, this will help create a more comfortable space for everyone to contribute freely.

PHASE TWO: MANAGING ACTIVE CONFLICT

Think Before You React

One of the biggest challenges in personal development is learning to create space between a stimulus (what happens) and your response (how you react). Developing the ability to pause, reflect, and consider all options and perspectives thoughtfully before responding can make a world of difference. The longer you stretch that pause, the more control you bring to the situation.

TIP: Teach team members tactics for mastering this skill. One effective approach is to respond with questions, which buys time and prevents rushed reactions. Ask for clarification or dig deeper into the other person's viewpoint while you create space to formulate an appropriate response. Often, the additional information reveals that your initial reaction may have been off, giving you a chance to adjust your approach. Practice these techniques as a team!

Master the Art of Active Listening

In today's fast-paced environment, many of us are so immersed in multitasking that we've lost the ability to truly listen. Active listening requires our full attention and focus, particularly during conflict resolution. It's more than just hearing words—it involves picking up on verbal and non-verbal cues, understanding the intent behind the message, and confirming what has been said by repeating back what we heard and asking clarifying questions. Active listening fosters genuine understanding and connection, making it an essential skill for navigating conflict.

TIP: Discourage multitasking and create a culture of presence. Encourage team members to put their phones down, silence notifications, make eye contact, and stay fully engaged in conversations. Individuals can ask themselves reflective questions during discussions, such as: "How is this person feeling? What's their mood? What are they expecting from me in this conversation?" This self-awareness enhances empathy and leads to more meaningful communication.

Accountability Over Blame

Conflict can stir up strong emotions. When tensions rise, it's easy to criticize the individual on the other side rather than addressing the core issue. Most people see themselves as the hero in their own story, making it difficult to step back and truly understand the opposing perspective. However, real conflict resolution isn't about determining who's right or wrong, nor about "winning" the argument. It's about identifying the best solution for the entire team. The key to resolving conflict is to attack the problem, not the people involved. Ask yourself: What's the underlying issue driving the emotion? What are the root causes behind the symptoms?

TIP: If conflicts seem stuck, revisit your processes. Ensure that teams are set up for success and clarity. Do you have clear project plans with defined ownership? Have you implemented a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) matrix? Leaders should model behavior that emphasizes accountability over ego, creating an environment where solutions—not blame—are the focus.

PHASE THREE: EMBEDDING POST-CONFLICT TEAM NORMS

Focus on Normalization and Moving Forward

When a conflict has been resolved and every voice has been heard, it's time to shift the focus toward the future. What lessons can we apply moving forward? How will the work evolve? Keep the team aligned with objectives and normalize conflict as a healthy, constructive part of the process.

TIP: Once the tension has subsided, reflect on how the conflict was handled. Ask: How well did we manage the situation? What can we improve next time? What systems or structures can we put in place to make the next conflict easier to resolve and an opportunity for growth?

Minimizing Future Conflict

Preventing unnecessary conflict is in everyone's best interest. Excellence can become a sustainable reality when teams trust each other and know that every member will bring full accountability to their work. When people believe that disagreements and differing opinions will be addressed fairly, and that all perspectives will be treated with respect, they'll approach conflict in a healthy, productive way. This fosters personal growth, team advancement, and the conditions for lasting, positive and disruptive change.

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