

# Mental Health – Addressing Conflicts Fact Sheets



## WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE CONFLICTS?

Conflicts are inevitable. Having different goals and styles can actually promote innovative solutions, creativity, and help bring about change. However negative results happen when conflicts are associated with blame, anger, and grudges. No matter what the source of the conflict is, resolution before the situation escalates is essential.

When addressing conflicts, a key step is focus on the issue, not the person.

## WHAT CAN AN EMPLOYER DO?

When investigating conflicts in the workplace, be sure to look for root causes especially if conflicts seem to be increasing. For example, Health Canada reports that 2 to 3\* times the number of conflicts can arise from stress in the workplace. The root cause – in this case, stress – may be caused by any number of sources.

Strategies to address conflict successfully in the workplace include:

Do:

- Encourage employees to seek constructive resolution for conflicts.
- Clarify exactly what the issue is.
- Understand that for most situations, there is an objective (factual) version of events, and a subjective (personal) view.
- Listen carefully and actively to fully understand the situation.
- Find common ground.
- Make sure people know it is okay to disagree at times.
- Treat everyone with respect and professionalism.
- Learn how to listen effectively (give undivided attention, turn off distractions like the radio or television, do not continue to work on the computer, etc.).
- Move from justification to resolution. Focus on actions in the future, not the past.
- Set clear boundaries.
- Have clearly defined job descriptions to help people understand their roles and what is expected of them.
- Define acceptable behaviour. Understanding what is appropriate and what is not will help avoid conflicts.

Don't

- Do not blame or judge anyone. Instead, look for opportunities to resolve the situation.
- Do not give advice. The best resolutions come from the people involved. If asked or if appropriate, you can offer ideas for discussion.
- Do not demand change. Try to find areas where collaboration or compromise can be made.

## WHAT ARE SOME WAYS OF INFORMALLY RESOLVING CONFLICTS?

Employees should be encouraged to seek help when resolving conflicts. The situation should be brought to the attention of the relevant parties. Employees may wish to try to discuss the situation with the person (people) they are having the conflict with, or they may wish to ask for help from other people.

If the issue is not serious or severe, resolution process can come from within the employee's department, if possible. If the employee feels uncomfortable raising the issue within their department, they should know where to seek help. Options may be to work with the Human Resources department, a designated manager, or through the use of an external professional.

Not all situations will require the same option or method of resolution. You may find that one type of strategy works well for certain situations or people, and not in other situations or with certain people.

Try to remain flexible and use a variety of strategies including:

**Avoiding:** In some cases, it may be appropriate to leave a conflict unresolved. In other cases, just leave the conflict unresolved for a cooling off period.

**Accommodating:** Accepting that there is a minor conflict (an "agreeing to disagree" arrangement) can be an important gesture for minor issues. Accommodating on the small issues may help to build trust and respect between those with the conflict.

**Confronting:** Discussing face-to-face in a respectful and professional manner may also help. Be sure to consider the other person's position and feelings on the issue. Confronting may include explaining why certain decisions were made ("I did not use your idea because...") and, if necessary, a further explanation such as "But unfortunately, the final decision for the project was made by (name) for those reasons".

**Collaborating:** Like confronting, you discuss the situation directly with the other person. However, you may decide to follow the explanation with an offer to involve the other person in another way. ("But, I was wondering if you had any ideas about...").

**Compromising:** With this option, the differences in opinion are discussed. A plan or option is reached together, and often both sides agree to modify their position.

**Communication:** Clear communication is essential for good working relationships. Often, subtle differences in verbal and nonverbal communications can change the way a situation is seen and interpreted. The more emotional the situation becomes, the more these cues affect our interpretation of the event(s).

## WHAT ARE MORE TIPS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICTS?

- Try to put yourself in the other person's position so that you can better understand how to address the issue.
- Ask for his or her recommendation.
- Repeat back to the person what you feel he or she is asking or telling you in order to clarify what you are hearing.
- Accept criticism in a positive way. When a complaint might be true, use statements like "you are probably right" or "it was my fault". If the criticism

- seems unwarranted, ask for clarification.
- Be honest. Do not make false statements or promises you cannot keep.
- Take the person seriously and be respectful.
- Break down the issue into smaller units and offer step-by-step solutions so the person is not overwhelmed by the complete situation.
- Be reassuring. Point out or offer choices.
- Do not take sides.
- Do not reject the person's demands or position from the start. Use a neutral, non-judgmental comment such as "that is an option".
- Do not make promises you cannot keep.

## **WHAT IS MEDIATION?**

Mediation is a more formal way to reach an understanding of the issue(s). The mediator should be someone who does not have an emotional stake in the outcome. Mediators may be from within the company, or a professional from outside. Resolving conflicts works best when people are calm, and can shift the focus to the issue instead of the people.

## **WHAT STEPS ARE INVOLVED IN MEDIATION?**

1. Schedule a meeting between the people experiencing the conflict after everyone has calmed down. The cooling down period is essential as it will help disassociate the emotions from the issues. Pick an appropriate time and place where all parties feel they are able to speak openly. Ensure that everyone in the meeting knows that they are invited to help get to the bottom of the situation.
2. Have people take turns explaining their position, issues or feelings. They should not be interrupted while speaking. Have someone else take notes. Encourage people to talk by asking questions like "What did you say?" or "What did you do?" rather than simply asking for their version of an event.
3. The note-taker should read back what each person said. Each person should confirm that the notes are accurate.
4. Invite everyone to brainstorm for solutions to the issue. Brainstorming does not place blame, nor should it be judgemental about whether an idea is good or bad.
5. Discuss these ideas. Talk about how each idea might work, or how it might not work.
6. Find a solution to the conflict that everyone can accept. This solution may not be anyone's first choice, but it is important that all of the people find it acceptable. If possible, let the people experiencing the conflict decide on a solution. They may need to agree on aspects such as what the issue is, what procedures to follow, what change is needed, and/or what steps to take in the future. If they cannot agree, then the mediator may have to make a decision. In either case, be clear about expectations and how everyone will know if the solution is working.
7. Put the solution into place for a set period of time (such as a week or two).
8. Follow-up and schedule a second meeting to make sure that the solution is working. Make any necessary adjustments to the solution if need be. Lessons learned from follow-up discussions may help to prevent similar situations from happening again.

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