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## Workplace conflict

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### Summary

- Workplace conflict is bad for business because it can lead to downturns in productivity and increases in absenteeism.
  - There are broadly two kinds of workplace conflict: when people's ideas, decisions or actions relating directly to the job are in opposition, or when two people just don't get along.
  - On an individual level, workplace conflict is stressful and unpleasant.
  - A difficult relationship with the boss is a common cause of work-related stress.
  - If your boss's behaviour is aggressive or abusive, or if all attempts to build a reasonable relationship fail, talk it over with your boss's supervisor.
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There are broadly two kinds of workplace conflict: when people's ideas, decisions or actions relating directly to the job are in opposition, or when two people just don't get along. The latter is often called 'a personality clash'.

A conflict of ideas on any aspect of business can often be productive, if the parties involved are willing to 'brainstorm' solutions together. Sometimes, the compromise can be better for business than either of the original ideas. Conflict of this kind often generates better work practices and initiates positive changes that would otherwise never have occurred.

Personality clashes, on the other hand, are very rarely productive. A clash may start with a dispute on business practices and escalate from there to mutual loathing, or else the two people may simply have disliked each other from the beginning.

This type of workplace conflict is bad for business, because it can lead to downturns in productivity and increases in absenteeism. On an individual level, workplace conflict is stressful and unpleasant. This anxiety may spill over into other areas of life and disrupt, for example, personal relationships.

### Types of workplace conflict

It is important to work out whether the conflict is caused by a personality clash or is due to a dispute over business ideas, decisions or actions. This may be difficult if the conflict has been raging for some time.

Some questions to think about include:

- Do you get frustrated or angry with the other person all the time, or just when particular work-related issues are raised?
- If you feel angry about their views on work-related issues, is your anger unreasonable or out of proportion? Would you feel the same way if someone else in the office had a similar viewpoint?
- Do you respect the other person in any way?

### Conflict over business ideas, decisions or actions

If the conflict is caused by opposing ideas, you could:

- Try to stick to the issue in all your dealings. This will encourage the other person to do the same.
  - Appreciate that other people have different opinions that are just as valid as yours.
  - Work out whether the issue really means that much to you, or whether your dislike for the other person has hardened your opinion.
  - Decide that your aim is to solve the problem, rather than 'win' the argument. Be prepared to compromise.
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- Push aside feelings or judgements about the other person, and try hard to listen and understand their point of view.
- Get others to mediate.

### **Personality clashes at work**

If the conflict is caused by a personality clash, the conflict will most likely continue unless attitudes and behaviours are changed. Suggestions include:

- Accept that people are different.
- Think about how much energy you are wasting in your dislike for the other person, and how you could invest that energy in more productive ways.
- Don't gossip or complain about the person to others.
- Try to be reasonable and polite, or at least neutral, to the other person.
- Work towards making your workplace a friendlier environment.

### **Conflict with your boss**

A good boss is someone who can effectively run a company and communicate with, and understand, their employees. If a boss involves their employees in business decisions, shows appreciation for hard work, and responds with bonuses and gifts at Christmas time, most people would enjoy working for them. However, a difficult relationship with the boss is a common cause of work-related stress.

Examples of difficult behaviour shown by some bosses include lack of communication, verbal bullying, inflexible thinking and rudeness. There are various strategies you can use to try and build a better relationship with your boss.

### **Unhelpful ways of dealing with a difficult boss**

Some common, but unhelpful, ways in which people may deal with a difficult boss include:

- using the same behaviour, such as rudeness or shouting
- silence and meek compliance
- avoiding interaction with the boss
- increased absenteeism
- quitting.

### **Different opinions in the workplace**

If you and your boss are divided by different thoughts on business practices, there are various ways to open the lines of communication, including:

- Be calm and reasonable. Remember that your boss is not obliged to feel the same way about things as you do.
- Aim to solve the disagreement, rather than win the argument. Be prepared to compromise.
- Approach your boss in a conciliatory way. Ask them for their opinions, thoughts and judgements on the issue. Really listen to them.
- Compliment them on any of their suggestions that you think are workable.
- Suggest your own ideas, rather than demand them. Explain how your ideas could benefit the organisation.
- Perhaps your boss will be more interested if you thoroughly research your ideas and present them professionally, highlighting possible benefits and drawbacks.

### **Personality clash with your boss**

If you just don't get along with your boss, it's important to find out why. Issues to consider include:

- Does your boss treat everyone badly, or just you?
- If you are singled out, is there some unresolved dispute between you?
- Are you giving your boss something to dislike about you, such as poor work performance or increased absenteeism?
- As a reality check, ask a colleague if they have noticed your boss's behaviour towards you. You may be overreacting.
- Do you have conflicts with other people at work? Perhaps you are the one with the difficult personality, not your boss.

### **Building a better relationship with your boss**

Building a better relationship with your boss means first taking into account their personality, and tailoring your strategies accordingly. For example, don't ask them why they treat you badly if direct confrontation angers them.

Suggestions include:

- If you have a colleague who gets along well with the boss, ask them for their 'secret'. How do they treat the boss?
- Keep calm. If your boss simply has terrible people skills, don't take their behaviour personally.
- Assert yourself in a reasonable and calm manner. Don't yell back, or take the abuse silently. Explain politely that you don't appreciate being spoken to in such a way.
- Next time the boss yells or treats you patronisingly, ask them if you have done something to upset them. This may open the lines of communication.
- Change your communication style. Take the time to listen to your boss. If they say something you agree with, then say so. People sometimes yell and rant if they feel they are being ignored. Make your boss feel validated.
- The clash may be caused by differences in working style – you may like to be left alone to do your job, but your boss may believe that good management means close supervision. Discuss your working needs calmly and reasonably.
- Seek advice from your human resources manager.
- If your boss's behaviour is aggressive or abusive, or if all attempts to build a reasonable relationship fail, talk it over with your boss's supervisor.

### **Being assertive with your boss**

Assertiveness means communicating your needs, wants, feelings, beliefs and opinions to others in a direct and honest manner, without intentionally hurting anyone's feelings. Suggestions on how to be more assertive include:

- Accept that assertiveness will take time to learn, just like any other skill.
- Practice talking in an assertive way.
- Use assertive language such as 'I feel...' and 'I think...', rather than aggressive language such as 'You always...' and 'You never...'
- Don't interrupt the other person when they are talking, and try hard to listen and understand their point of view.
- If necessary, seek the advice of a professional (such as a psychologist) to learn assertive behaviour.

### **Workplace violence**

Workplace violence is conflict escalated to the point of threats, insults, racial abuse, sexual harassment or physical contact, such as pushing or punching. Under Victoria's *Occupational Health and Safety Act 1985*, employers are strictly responsible for workplace violence and have a duty of care that can't be delegated.

The affected worker should approach their employer, occupational health and safety representative, personnel manager or human resources officer. The person's union or the Victorian WorkCover Authority can also offer help and advice.

The Victorian WorkCover Authority investigates breaches of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and is involved in issues such as workers compensation. Document your experience of workplace violence as thoroughly as you can, such as taking photographs of injuries and keeping a diary of all incidents.

### **Criminal acts in the workplace**

Some acts of workplace violence, such as physical assault, are criminal acts and you should call the police.

### **Where to get help**

- Your employer
- Your human resources manager
- Psychologist
- Relationships Australia (Victoria) Tel. 1300 364 277
- Job Watch: Employment Rights Legal Centre Tel. (03) 9662 1933 or 1800 331 617
- WorkCover Advisory Service Tel. 1800 136 089 or (03) 9641 1444
- ACTU Workers' Hotline Tel. 1300 362 223

### **Things to remember**

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