



Workplace Satisfaction Project Conflict Management Tools

Conflict management is uncomfortable for everyone. It's awkward, challenging, and if done poorly, can significantly increase the conflict. But it's necessary, and a vital skill for all of us.

Many challenges arise in NPS organizational behavior regarding conflict management; as an organization, we are more reluctant to proactively address conflict than most. Surveys reveal several reasons why: in the NPS, professional relationships very frequently overlap significantly with meaningful personal relationships, meaning that when conflict occurs, there is much more at stake and more minefields to tread; there is a widespread cultural assumption that nearly all employees are smart, highly-motivated, and 'doing their best' as they understand it, an assumption which deters critical/constructive feedback; and high levels of employee passion and dedication can lead to conflict when making decisions, as employees tend to be deeply emotionally invested in what they perceive as the 'right' way forward, and relatively unwilling to 'compromise' their beliefs when alternate solutions are proposed.

Employees at all levels should be skilled in conflict management, but it is a critical skill for managers to master. Problems must be addressed, not avoided, even when avoiding is the "easy" thing to do; problems tend to grow when ignored. Good conflict management skill therefore relies first on courage, then on empathy.

- Conflict management must start with a genuine openness to collaboration and compromise, or it will generally be unsuccessful. Conflict very rarely involves one side being completely right and one side being completely wrong – the answer is often found somewhere between the two, and each side must be willing to work toward the middle place.
- Finding some empathy for the other party in a conflict is necessary for successfully resolving the conflict. Taking a minute to walk a mile in their shoes or see through their eyes is an invaluable part of conflict management.
- Make sure that good relationships are a priority throughout the conflict management process. Treat the other person with respect. Be courteous, and to discuss matters constructively.
- Active listening is a critical conflict management skill. Failing to accurately hear the other side of the problem – and more importantly, failing to accurately hear the fundamental concerns of the the other party and understand what they need – will result in failure to mitigate the conflict. Listening must occur on both sides, and no action on the conflict should be taken until both sides have heard and been heard.
- 'Mirroring', or restating what you heard back to the other party, demonstrates active listening and engagement, and can significantly aid in reaching a middle ground.
- Approach a conflict management experience as an investigation. Make no assumptions, and ask clear, neutral questions until the true nature of the conflict is known to all. Oftentimes, the conflict at hand is just a symptom of a larger, deeper conflict beneath; the symptoms will keep arising until the larger conflict is resolved.
- Remember that conflict is fundamentally about how we define ourselves and what we stand for; it arises when we are in meaningful contact with people who seem to stand for something contrary to what we stand for. Too often, conflict management stalls when one or both sides 'digs in' and refuses to compromise on what they feel is an 'integrity' issue. These conflicts must be re-addressed as operational decisions and *not* personal value judgments.

- Separate people from problems. Recognize that, in many cases, the other person is not «being difficult» – real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. By separating the problem from the person, you can discuss issues without damaging relationships. Address the problem, not the person.
 - Objective, third-party mediators – from an outside source, or utilizing employees without a stake in the matter – can be invaluable in resolving entrenched conflicts. Mediators must recognize and validate the concerns and feelings of all involved parties before moving toward solutions.
 - The ‘Blame Game’ has no winners.
 - There is always a way to deal effectively with conflict in the NPS, whether we immediately see a clear way forward or not. You do have tools at your disposal. Seek out management assistance in the matter; go as far up the chain as you need to in order to get an objective ear. Contact your Employee Relations Specialist. Utilize mediators. Have the courage to constructively initiate challenging conversations using conflict management tools and emotional intelligence tools.
 - Explore options together. Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you might reach it jointly.
 - Demonstrate positive, open body language. Demonstrate positive, calm voice tone. Use ‘non-absolute’ statements (instead of saying “You *always* or *never* do this”, say “You *frequently* or *sometimes* do this”).
 - Pick your battles. Human nature makes us want to be right, even to the point of being defensive or arguing points that do not matter in the big picture. It’s even fair game to ask the other person, “On a scale of one-to-10, how important is this issue to you?” and compare scores to see the relative worth of the ‘battle’. Ask yourself: “On this matter, would I rather be **happy** or **right**?”
 - Focus on the future, not on rehashing an unsatisfying past.
 - Don’t forget to celebrate and reinforce agreement.
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