

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

Because prevention has its limits, having strategies for managing conflict is essential. As the leader, your action (or inaction) sets the tone of employee interactions.

Before I go on, let me clarify that conflict management and conflict resolution are not the same. Conflict management includes the efforts you make to slow or stop the progress of conflict. Conflict management addresses the conflict-inducing situation such as disagreements over the process of doing the work or friction over decision-making. It includes intervening at a stage when tensions, while climbing, are not critical. Conflict management contains the problem. By contrast, conflict resolution is used to resolve the issue between the affected parties. It is needed when emotions have become heightened and disruptive behavior is taking place. Conflict resolution becomes necessary when conflict management fails to identify or address growing concerns.

The strategies that follow will guide you in ensuring that conflict is managed thoughtfully and with an unbiased response.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT BASICS

Principle #1 – Keep It Close

Conflict is most effectively managed at the level in which it occurs and therefore should always start there. Team members experiencing conflict receive the most informed response from the manager or supervisor of their group. Peer support may also be successful. Taking an issue up the chain of command, to another department, or even HR, however, is not ideal. Those individuals, dedicated and interested though they might be, will be less informed about the individuals and circumstances surrounding the dispute. Any change they make could have unintended consequences.

Here are some considerations for conflict management planning:

- Provide training. Those who manage others will need support in developing skills in communication, managing difficult conversations, and resolving conflict.

- Determine the circumstances for elevating an issue beyond the direct supervisor.
- Identify who will be informed of any issues being addressed.

Principle #2 – Everyone Has a Role

Because conflict is best managed at the level in which it occurs, every supervisor, manager, and leader must clearly understand their role in managing conflict. They must know their responsibilities as well as the limitations of their involvement. It must be simple and straightforward enough to manage issues fairly, consistently, and appropriately.

Each employee will need to know their role in bringing issues or concerns forward. For this to occur, staff will need clarity about how an issue will be treated and what they can expect. Without this, they will not feel comfortable bringing their issues forward. Finally, everyone in the organization must be committed to the same purpose: resolving conflict at the earliest stage possible.

These are some considerations for conflict management planning:

- Identify roles and responsibilities. For example, leaders, managers, and supervisors have a role in managing the conflict on their team; and each employee has a responsibility to speak up and seek help rather than acting out.
- Ensure that employees know when to access help and have clear guidance on whom to speak with.
- Encourage leaders, managers, and supervisors the word to identify for their team *how* they would like to be informed of an issue or concern.
- Determine what information will be kept confidential. Inform employees of these guidelines.

Principle #3 – It's Better with a Champion

With individual responsibilities spread throughout the organization, it is tremendously helpful to have a person focused and dedicated to this effort. Your champion's role is to ensure that consistent efforts are made, and desired outcomes are achieved.

The champion will check in regularly with employees to determine if issues are being brought to the table. They will routinely meet with managers, supervisors, and other leaders to ensure those leaders are ready to support their teams and manage any rising conflict. The champion's role is that of a sounding board and problem-solver, helping others identify and process what needs to be done.

Determining the right champion differs from organization to organization but is often a VP of People or a leader in Human Resources. Already familiar with policies, interpersonal dynamics, and, we hope, holding a positive relationship with all employees, these professionals typically have both the reach, and breadth of knowledge and experience to be helpful.

Additional considerations for conflict management planning:

- Leading an initiative of this magnitude requires time and dedication. Employees will need to trust the person championing the initiative. Consider those best suited and most energized toward this purpose as you determine who will champion this cause.
- Identify a second person (champion) who can be called upon when your primary champion is unavailable or is seen as being biased on an issue.

Basic Principle #4 – Modeling Matters

Healthy conflict management starts at the top. As a leader, you must show your team that you are open, communicative, thoughtful, and transparent. If you have a champion, engaging with them and showing clear support for their role encourages others to do the same. As you demonstrate these positive behaviors, you give rise to teams that interact productively, and access their resources when necessary. While your behavior alone will not determine the outcome of a conflict, it can determine the willingness and flexibility of your team to come to the table and listen. As the leader, what you do matters. You are the starting point, the true north of acceptable behavior.

Consider these for conflict management planning:

- Identify ways to encourage employees (at all levels) to bring their concerns to the table.

- Acknowledge and appropriately reward the managers and supervisors who are actively supporting their team through conflict management.

C.A.L.M. the Conflict

Managing conflict means staying in front of the issues, being ready to respond to them when they percolate to the surface, and supporting your team in resolving issues on their own. To do that, you must stay CALM.

The backbone for managing conflict, reducing tensions, and helping your team resolve their issues appropriately requires Connection, Acknowledgment, Listening, and, only then, Managing the conflict by taking action. I refer to this as the CALM approach.

Step 1 – CONNECT (WITH YOUR TEAM)

Having a positive connection with your team is essential for managing conflict. Connection builds trust and confidence. It allows your employees to feel safe in sharing their concerns. When you have a strong connection with your team, you are poised to be aware of and therefore prepared to help address issues of conflict that emerge. Being connected also makes you more likely to notice those small changes in behavior which could denote that something is wrong.

For your employees, connection builds a feeling of being valued. Imagine that you have formed a strong professional connection with a member of your team; we'll call her Sally. Sally believes you value her work and see her contributions as necessary and important. Because she feels appreciated, when Sally has a workplace issue, she trusts her concerns will be met with your interest and support. For that reason, she openly shares these matters with you.

By contrast, consider a team member who does not experience a feeling of connection with you; we'll call him Beau. Missing that connection, Beau is less likely to feel valued by you and may doubt your willingness to aid or support him even for addressing the very same issues experienced by Sally. Rather than bringing the matter to your attention, Beau would be expected to withhold his concerns from you.

Staying connected in that way enhances your ability to learn about issues early on. With that awareness, you can address conflict as it emerges,

and you can maintain far greater control of your team's ability to be collaborative and productive.

It is worth noting that your demonstration of support and willingness to help your team is more important than your competency for resolving their conflicts. Why? Because by being connected, you ensure that their conflict gets addressed even when you cannot directly resolve the dispute.

Leaders who have formed a solid and genuine connection with their team, where each member feels the leader recognizes their value and contribution to the whole, are well positioned to excel in managing conflict.

Step 2 – ACKNOWLEDGE (THE CONFLICT)

When tensions are brewing, the most essential step you can take is to verbally acknowledge the problem at hand. Perhaps you notice friction during a meeting or hear an offhand comment made by a member of your team or through the channels of gossip. However you become aware of the friction, and even when you only suspect its existence, acknowledging the conflict and sharing that recognition is your first step to bringing about change. It tells your team that you see them and care about what is happening. Acknowledgment creates an opportunity to discuss the situation, modify the trajectory of the behaviors, and reduce or eliminate the underlying tensions.

Acknowledging the issue is not easy. Many leaders I have encountered cringe at this notion. They don't want to get involved; they don't want to know about the conflict or invite discussion about it. Some believe that doing so will give credence to the problem or make it worse. This is not the case. Avoiding or ignoring conflict is a tremendous mistake. It allows it to grow, fester, and spread.

To illustrate this and keep you from making this mistake, I'll describe a few of the most common avoidance strategies and the outcome of each:

Feigning Ignorance

Many leaders wanting to stay out of the fray will feign ignorance of an issue. They may actively ignore a problem playing out right in front of them or turn a blind eye to challenges they know are occurring behind the scenes.

The primary issue with selective ignorance is that it provides a ripe opportunity for the conflict to grow and radiate. Without intervention, seeds of discontent quickly grow into adversarial relationships and toxic work environments. Conflict is like a weed. It grows and spreads, becoming ever more difficult to root out.

The secondary issue is that ignoring conflict impacts a leader's reputation. Disregarding an issue speaks to either the leader's ignorance about the problem or his lack of interest in resolving it. Neither is a good look for any leader. It sends a message that the team doesn't matter or that the leader lacks competence for managing others. That belief quickly stretches beyond those directly involved in any dispute. Others, who are undoubtedly aware of the issue, receive this message as well.

Finally, Leaders who feign ignorance as a means of *staying out of it*, lose a tremendous opportunity to let each team member know of their value. Instead, the assumption remains that the leader doesn't care, and those involved don't matter and aren't valued.

Minimizing the Problem

Leaders minimize conflict for a variety of reasons. It can be that they are uncomfortable with conflict, they don't know what to do about it, they don't have the time or energy to deal with it, or that they simply think the issue is insignificant and not worthy of their time or attention.

Leaders who minimize conflict are prone to say things like "Let it go" or "Move on." I've known some leaders who, striving to be fair, have said that to their entire team. Others promise, though neglect to, come back to the issue later. I've even known a leader to tell a member of his team to, "Put on your big boy pants and deal with it." Actions like these don't address the issue. At best, these antics kick the proverbial can down the road, leaving the problem to be dealt with later. At worst, they add fuel to the already burning fire.

Unaware of the mistake of pushing past the issues, these leaders dismiss it. They view the conflict as an unnecessary hurdle. I've found some resent their team for bringing the issue forward. Others gaslight those who complain, blaming them for creating the problem. Rather

than addressing the employee's concerns, these leaders direct those in crisis to push past it. In so doing, the leader is passing judgment on the importance of the issue. The leader's involvement, intentionally or not, serves to shame those experiencing or complaining about the conflict.

Beyond the damage of creating shame for those on the team is the reality that people can't simply let go of or move off an issue simply because they are instructed to do so. The mere suggestion creates resentment toward the leader or causes the person to double down in their beliefs or complaints. They will seek to prove the leader wrong, to press that the issue *does* matter.

The Quick Fix

Many leaders' process for managing conflict is to provide a quick-fix solution. Their efforts include separating team members, switching someone's desk location, adjusting the reporting structure, or transferring a member to a different team or department. While they succeed in making things look different, the reality is that the leader has neglected to address the underlying issue, leaving it to resurface in a new location..

These underlying problems often arise from struggles with communication, accountability, respect, or other behaviors we know as essential for a healthy, high-functioning team. A superficial change does not attend to those deeper problems. The "quick fix" further negates the potential positive result of showing the team they matter to the leader and, by proxy, the organization: that they are worthy of having their issue resolved. Finally, it eliminates the possibility to learn (through the process of working it out) new skills for communicating and managing conflict. The quick fix costs the leader an opportunity to build and develop her team while very likely planting the seeds for further conflicts down the road.

Believing It Will Self-Correct

Lastly, some leaders don't engage or help because they believe the employees will work it out on their own or that the problem will otherwise self-correct.

Leaders holding this viewpoint usually have a broader pattern of avoidance. In other words, their belief that the situation will self-correct is an extension of their justification for having ignored or minimized the issue. Unfortunately, regardless of the underlying reasons, this belief is misguided.

By the time an issue has reached a leader's awareness, it is rarely early in its development. More often, the conflict between individuals has been built on second, third, and fourth chances. It is the result of repeated disappointments and ongoing frustration. In fact, an issue won't often register as conflict, even among those directly involved, until an unacceptable pattern or trend has emerged. At that point, the problem is rarely given to self-correction.

Instead, that is the point at which behaviors or complaints begin reaching the awareness of others. It typically starts at the peer level, as frustrated team members complain, seek others with a shared viewpoint, or begin to make snarky comments. It takes time before the issue becomes large or significant enough to reach the leader's attention. By that point, the brewing tensions will not simply self-correct. That is why it is incumbent upon the leader to acknowledge and address issues that reach their awareness.

While Leaders avoid conflict because they don't know how to resolve it. The priority here is simply *acknowledging* the conflict. In steps 3 & 4, I'll cover what to do next.

It's Not Only Leaders – Employees Do This Too

It's important to note that acknowledging conflict is not only a challenge for leaders. It is similarly common for those involved in such a situation to comparably ignore it, minimize it, and avoid it for as long as they can.

An employee may be embarrassed at being involved in a conflict. They may feel the issue is insignificant, will self-correct, or that it is beneath their leader to help resolve it. Similarly, an employee may hold back if they think being a party to an interpersonal struggle will reflect poorly on them. If they believe the employee with whom they are struggling is *avored* by the leader or organization, that too could hamper the process. There are endless reasons why an employee

may withhold their concerns, especially early on. In fact, by the time you learn of it, problems may have been growing for weeks, months, or years.

That is why, as the leader, it is essential that *you* acknowledge the conflict. It allows your team to process through and address their issues or concerns. It gives them permission to accept their situation and to work toward resolving it. By acknowledging the issue, you can begin to control and change it.

Acknowledging the issue is a critical first step in managing conflict.

Step 3 – LISTENING

Once you become aware of a conflict, regardless of whether you believe you have the requisite skills for *resolving* the problem, it is your responsibility to manage that conflict. Your role after verbally acknowledging the issue is simple: listen. Listen to your team member who comes forward to discuss a concern and give them your undivided attention.

Listening is an essential skill, and there are dozens of books devoted to teaching and developing it. The core point is this; when it comes to conflict management, listening requires an intentional focus on the *perspective of others*. Before engaging in the more reflexive response of getting into helper mode and actively working to solve the problem, seek to learn the perspective of those making the complaint or bringing forward the issue.

Work to understand the point of view of those bringing an issue forward, even if you think it is obvious. Ask questions, learn why the situation is causing them problems and clarify what they want to see changed. This may feel foreign to you or challenging as you want nothing more than to resolve the issue and move past the conflict. However, maintaining your focus on listening and learning is incredibly important. Avoid the temptation to solve the problem quickly.

You may be wondering, *Aren't some problems simple enough that I can just resolve them? Isn't it better to help my employee so that everyone can move on?* Maybe, but probably not.

Let me explain by way of an example. Say a member of your team, Juanita, comes to you and asks a seemingly straightforward question—

one where you have experience and a ready answer. Juanita asks, perhaps rhetorically, “How am I supposed to work with Barry? He’s impossible!”

Assume this is the first time you’re hearing this from Juanita, but that you’ve worked with Barry in the past, and that is why the employee has come to you for counsel. If you get into helper mode, your reaction may be to commiserate and help the staff member feel better. Perhaps Barry is a pain to work with. Or, knowing this, you may offer Juanita solutions that you’ve found successful when working with Barry. You’re trying to *resolve* the issue.

However, these seemingly helpful, innocuous responses have inherent flaws.

If, after hearing, “How do I work with Barry? He’s impossible!” you begin commiserating or offering Juanita advice to deal with Barry, you’ve effectively taken her side, validating her complaints about Barry. Consider the potential impacts of that. Juanita may now feel emboldened. She may feel you’ve got her back or agree with her. That, in and of itself, can cause things to spin in the wrong direction. But another circumstance may also occur: you’ve acknowledged that you know there is a problem working with Barry and that you have failed or are continuing to fail to address it.

Your quick *solution* has not helped anyone and may be placing your organization in legal jeopardy. Juanita now has the impression that the problem (Barry) isn’t going away, that she will have to deal with him on her own. Barry has either been pigeonholed as a problem person, or he has been given a pass for his bad behavior. Finally, your role as the leader has been compromised as you aren’t addressing the problem head-on. You may even have created a situation where Juanita now believes herself to be favored. The point here is that even minor issues require a more considered response.

Helping when you haven’t begun by really listening can backfire. Your role is to listen until you truly understand the issue and the perspective of the person sharing their story. After that, you can begin to support the employee. In this example and in many situations, your support will entail coaching the person coming to you, guiding them so that they can solve their own problem. It follows the expression, “Give a man a fish; he’ll eat for a day.

Teach a man to fish; he’ll be fed for a lifetime.”

When an employee like Juanita comes forward with an issue, your role is to ask questions, listen, learn about the situation, and gain the perspective of the person sharing their problem.

The questions I ask are purposeful and straightforward:

What is wrong?

Why is that a problem?

What is the impact?

How have you tried to resolve it?

What do you think will help?

These questions are *not* a simple checklist. Beyond the obvious, each has a specific purpose.

What is wrong? This open-ended question invites a story. Depending on your relationship with the member of your team, they may keep this overly brief or use this single question as a way of answering not only this question but providing information on the next two as well. If they keep their response overly succinct and you don't have all the answers, continue with the following question to gain the broader story. Your goal is to understand not only what is wrong but why they are coming to you.

Why is that a problem? You may think their answer will be obvious, but it often is not. I could tell countless stories of being surprised by the unique answers I hear. What you see as the problem may be far different than what the employee is experiencing. Even if you are correct, you demonstrate care and concern, good listening, and healthy leadership by discovering why the issue matters to *them*.

What is the impact? This question allows you to better understand “why” it is a problem. Again, even if it seems obvious, ask this question. The response will be invaluable in understanding the need and communicating it to others if necessary. The impact may be personal—it's causing stress, creating anxiety, or it may be related to their ability to be productive or maintain their reputation among their colleagues. All of these are valid and important. The impact informs you more specifically of why the issue needs addressing.

How have you tried to resolve it? Spoiler alert! Most often, people think they have tried when really, they've practiced patience and avoidance. These are not going to move the needle. Those efforts only suggest that the complaining employee believes the problem person is acting with malice or intent. Remember, vindicate; don't villainize. It is entirely possible that the problem person has no idea they are creating a problem. The complaining employee needs help to resolve the issue and the starting point is in learning what they have already attempted.

What do you think will help? Again, the answers may surprise you. Some employees don't know or just want to keep you informed. Some want drastic action. "Fire them." Others take pause and consider the question more fully. However they respond, it gives you guidance on the urgency of the matter and their vision for change.

After asking those questions and processing their responses, you will often find yourself in a position to coach the employee, allowing them to address the problem themselves. That is the role you will most often play—guiding and supporting others, enabling them to take necessary and appropriate action.

Step 4 – MANAGING THE SITUATION (TAKING ACTION)

Your final step for managing conflict on your team is to take action. However, your role is one of guiding not solving. You are helping your team learn to solve their problems. Returning to our example with Juanita and Barry, your role would be to provide your frustrated employee, Juanita, with guidance for communicating directly with Barry—to coach her with strategies for approaching Barry, sharing her concerns, and listening to his thoughts—to build her confidence to connect with Barry (vindicate not villainize) so they may jointly determine any necessary changes. That will allow Juanita the security of knowing you acknowledge her need for change and support her efforts to bring it about. Your wisdom is needed not your solutions. Your role is to identify the best strategies for engaging with Barry and provide a safety net if things don't go according to plan.

Your responsibility to your team is to contain the conflict, keep it from growing or spreading, and help those involved feel ready and able to resolve the issue for themselves.

But wouldn't it be so much faster if. . .

I bet you're thinking it. You've probably jumped in and helped solve dozens of issues in the past. You may never have noticed the problems that creates. It falls into your abyss.

Here's the reality. Attempting to shortcut this process—to offer solutions in lieu of connecting, acknowledging, and listening—will have consequences. Acting prematurely forces you to make assumptions about the situation. The assumptions alone will lead to frustration if you miss the mark. But more to the point, your haste suggests that the issue, and therefore those involved, are not worthy of your time. Each will cause them to feel disregarded, dismissed, or even betrayed. Even when your advice is sound, when you have not displayed CALM, your team may be hard-pressed to take it.

Once You're CALM, You Can Coach

Your role in managing conflict begins with understanding the needs of your team members. After you have acquired knowledge of the issue *as they see it*, your role transitions to coaching—coaching them to resolve the issue for themselves. Your role culminates with follow-up. Follow-up is essential as it verifies that the troubled employee has taken steps to address their problem and confirms that the necessary change(s) have occurred.

A Final Step – Follow Up

In keeping with our example of Barry, your follow-up would begin with Juanita, the frustrated employee. Your goal is to determine if the conversation she had with Barry was successful and led to both change and improvement. This final step is essential for confirming that progress is being made, or at least attempted. It would identify for you if Juanita successfully brought resolution to her issues.

By following up, you become aware when things hit a roadblock, the conflict is not resolved, or when additional efforts are needed. Common hurdles you can expect to encounter include that the troubled employee did not take action, is fearful, or for other reasons is resistant to bringing the issue directly to her colleague. Perhaps *bad Barry* has refused to engage or makes promises but then does not change. It may even be that the conversation between Barry and Juanita went well, yet the problems persist.

Follow-up is essential for ensuring you remain aware of the progress in getting the issue resolved. If those involved have reached a workable solution, you can support them in following it. If they have not, you know that other steps or interventions are needed. Finally, and perhaps the most important reason to provide follow-up, is that it demonstrates to your employees that you value them and their role at the company. This comes back to the importance of connection.

STRATEGIES FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT

Sometimes issues are deeper rooted or further reaching than you first thought. Perhaps the team member (Juanita) who sought your counsel has made clear-cut efforts but has been unable to bring about change. Or, you have learned that the issues are not limited to her and have spread to affect the group or team. In those circumstances, providing support via one-to-one coaching will have limited success. The situation is most likely going to need a different level of involvement.

As an example, consider the case of *bad Barry* and presume you have learned that his behavior is so destructive as to be impacting the whole team. *Revisit the story about Stuart and Oliver in chapter 3 for a real-life example of this situation.* In either circumstance, despite multiple members of the team making a concerted effort, no one has been able to bring about a shift or change. Your role then, as the leader, is to attend to this issue directly to support the extended team, and in so doing, to ensure the wellbeing of the organization. As a leader, you have the authority and responsibility to do so. It is part of your role.

Following are my guidelines for appropriately engaging in conflict resolution.

Listen to Both Sides

Conflict resolution, at its core, involves fairness and balance. When you are working to support a deeper issue, one where multiple people are involved, you must give equal time and weight to hearing the perspectives of each person or *side*. Ask questions to understand their needs, point of view, etc. Beyond the surface-level rationale of making things seem fair, gleaning the perspectives of all those involved is essential for identifying viable solutions.

You may be shocked to learn that I have conducted over 1,400 mediations during my career. In each mediation, I listen to the stories of the disputants one at a time. With few exceptions, the first story I hear is compelling. It seems to tell me everything I need to know. It guides me into seeing solutions for change.

Yet, my role is to hear both sides. So, while I may be tempted to move on to solutions, I wait and listen to the other side(s) to the story. And then it happens. I am surprised at what the second story reveals. It often alters my perspective completely as it transforms the whole situation. This shifting of view is the *norm* when resolving conflict. There is rarely a bad guy or unprovoked malintent underlying the problems. It is a matter of perspective.

To reach a legitimate solution, you must fully understand the problem. When you only hear one point of view, at best, you will only know half of the problem.

Vindicate; Don't Villainize

As you are listening to members of your team share their concerns, it is natural to feel drawn to one side of the story. While feeling that way is normal, acting on it is problematic.

In my work, I have maintained a firm belief that those at the heart of an issue, those seemingly responsible for the rising tensions or conflict, did not intend to create harm. I seek to understand the purpose or intention of their behavior. I look to vindicate not villainize them for their actions. This perspective allows me to stay curious not judgmental. As I hold that perspective, the person before me instinctively feels safe. They are willing to share their story. It becomes a positive self-fulfilling prophecy. I learn what is behind their behavior, and I can bring about change.

Maintaining that position will be of even greater importance for you. When you seek to vindicate not villainize, each team member will feel trusted and valued. Start by assuming each person involved in an issue has reasons that underlie their behavior. Approach them from a place of curiosity. Rather than guess the circumstances driving their conduct, probe with questions that help you understand it. It may be helpful to openly explain that you are trying to appreciate their perspective. When you engage your team like this, from a place of sincerity and with an open

mind, you will find this process enlightening. People always have a reason for their behavior. Take the time to find out what it is, and you will likely see the path needed for change. And so might they.

Provide Transparency and Inclusion

When you support your team in working through an issue, transparency is essential. Openly share what efforts you will be making. Be inclusive and get feedback before enacting any changes. When you've listened to both sides of a story, resist the temptation to dictate an outcome. Rather, engage with those who will be impacted. Give them responsibility for identifying potential solutions. Allow them to determine what is needed. If giving that latitude is not possible and you must assume the role of the decision-maker, do it openly. Be honest about the reasons for addressing the issue yourself and what you expect as an outcome. Be inclusive, allowing all those impacted to hear what changes are happening and why.

Engage in Follow-Up

Conflict resolution is not the last step. Imagine you've engaged with those in conflict, and the issue has reached a conclusion. Areas for change and strategies for resolution have been negotiated and agreed upon. You, and those on your team, feel ready to move forward. However, don't be quick to assume the issue is behind you.

Change takes time, and no amount of effort ensures perfection. Even with a genuine commitment and dedicated effort, people will slip up, fall into old habits, or otherwise go back on their promises for change.

More to the point, a conflict that has come to your attention has no doubt been brewing for some time. Each employee's faith in the other's pledge for change is flimsy at best. As each extends their trust and offers hope, they still expect to be let down. And, when human nature steps in and a mistake is made, it often seems that it was all for nothing. The impression becomes that the other party has not taken it seriously. That nothing has changed.

Your follow-up demonstrates your commitment to bringing forth lasting change. It ensures that the process addresses the concerns and delivers the outcomes it intended to resolve. The follow-up process is similar to that used in other situations, but the approach is now more directive.

- Engage each involved party in a private conversation about the situation.
- Ask questions to determine the level of progress that has already taken place and identify what changes are still needed.
- Share that information with the other party. Where appropriate, highlight what each has done to honor the agreement (even if it didn't work out as planned).
- Discuss and clarify how they, you, or others can help bring about further needed change.
- Share next steps, including whom else you will be speaking with, when you will next circle back with an update or to check in on progress, and, where appropriate, alternative efforts that will occur to bring about change in the areas previously identified.

By staying engaged and following up, you can support the sanctity of the agreement that was reached. Your effort shows support for each person and a genuine desire to see a return to healthy workplace relations. Your follow-up effort will be instrumental in getting things back on track without inflaming the original conflict. If the agreement was flawed and left pieces unresolved, follow-up ensures that you are aware and can lead the team members in revisiting issues needing further attention.

Follow-up is key to success.

Putting It All in Action

To help you put the steps for conflict resolution in action, let's return to our scenario with Barry and Juanita. When we left off, you had coached Juanita. You had helped bolster her confidence and supported her in identifying ways to communicate her concerns and needs directly with Barry. Imagine now that the issues Juanita has been having with Barry have not improved and are increasing in frequency or intensity. Having already connected with Juanita, and having heard her view of the situation, your next effort will be to engage with Barry (getting both sides). Your purpose is to alert Barry to the problem and then give him space to tell his side. That serves to identify his awareness of the issue, his perspective of the circumstances, and to explore his needs and concerns. Remember, no

problem is ever one-sided. There are always important considerations for each person involved.

As you focus on vindicating Barry, he will be more likely to share the reasons for his actions or behavior. While hearing Barry's perspective may not affect the outcome or what ultimately needs to change, providing him with an opportunity to be heard will create a noticeable shift in his buy-in for the changes ahead.

For conflict resolution, this approach is both effective and necessary. *People want to feel heard and understood more than they want to be right.* Take the time to learn why a behavior is occurring. Seek to understand what underlies a lousy attitude. The outcome of your effort will go a long way toward resolving the problem and bringing about change.

Once the issues and perspectives have been heard and you have reached an understanding of what underlies Barry and Juanita's workplace struggles (for example, poor communication or weak boundaries), have Barry and Juanita determine solutions alongside you. Depending on the nature of the issue, you may be able to meet with them in a collaborative fashion (that's ideal), or you may do so with each separately. In either situation, ask them to share the concessions they will make to create productive change and resolve the issue(s). Do not work to create equality in the efforts each makes; instead, create balance in that each has a role to play in bringing about lasting change. In our example, Barry would likely have the lion's share of responsibility for bringing about change. But Juanita would be responsible for communicating with Barry about her needs and concerns in real time, helping Barry stay mindful of those needs.

Helping Barry and Juanita find a new normal for working together is not your last step. You will still need to circle back to determine if the changes are happening and working. Ask Juanita if things have changed? To what degree? Is there still progress? Does she feel things are better, or is further help needed? You would ask Barry similar questions about Juanita's efforts to improve the situation.

Where things have slipped up, your role is to help get them back on track. Encourage each to take ownership for any lapse and to recommit to the other their efforts to change.

Follow-up efforts are long-term efforts. Tensions and impressions are formed over time and will similarly take time to remove. Remain present

and committed to the goal of having a healthy workforce. Remain a part of the solution by keeping your engagement strong. Your effort at managing conflict in this manner demonstrates your role as a leader and builds others' trust in you.