Resolving Conflict

**DON'T "WIN."
RESOLVE.**

KATE MATSUDAIRA

This week, I was talking to one of my employees about one of my least/most favorite topics in the whole world: conflict.

I am conflicted about conflict. On one hand, I hate it. Hearing people disagree, even about minor things, makes me want to run through the nearest wall and curl up under my bed until it's over.

On the other hand, when it happens, I always want to get into it.

I think that urge to jump in and get involved actually comes from my discomfort with conflict; I hate it so much that when it comes up, I just want to dive in so it can be over as soon as possible.

I have this need to help everyone understand each other's point of view, show them what they have in common, and make it so the conflict is just over.

By leaning into conflict, rather than trying to avoid it, I think you can often actually get it over with faster. And it's a pretty good thing to be known as a person who can help everyone get on the same page and get back to being productive.

How do you feel about conflict? Especially conflict at work?

In a perfect world, we would all get along with our coworkers and bosses all the time. Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world.

While most of us make our best efforts to avoid conflict at work, occasionally it is unavoidable. Here are some of my best tips on how to make all of your conflicts in the workplace healthy and (hopefully) productive, so you can move on and get back to what really matters.

1. Give up on the idea of “winning”

The best way to win an argument is to let go of the idea that you actually have something to “win.”

Winning, in this case, doesn't mean getting your way or showing the opposition how they are wrong. Instead, it means being the person who helps everyone get on the same page so everyone can move forward.

With most technical decisions there aren't “right answers”; there are only different approaches that all have pros and cons. Getting aligned in the decision-making process and determining which tradeoffs are acceptable is better than trying to demonstrate who is right.

If you want to be successful (whether as a leader or a senior engineer), you need to be someone who can look at the big picture, assess how to move forward, and then get everyone working on the same page again. That is true leadership and what most managers value in great employees.

2. Start by looking for common ground

At the heart of many workplace conflicts is often a common goal. Two people disagreeing over strategy might

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have the shared goal of wanting to execute a project at the highest quality possible. Their conflict isn't as deep as it might look from the outside; really, they already agree on the important parts and are just fighting about details.

For example, this happens a lot when you have operations and software development teams with competing priorities: the ops team wants to minimize change and risk (and thereby operations), and the dev team wants to ship their features as fast as possible. The reality is both teams should be focused on the best thing for the business and the customer—which is likely somewhere in the middle.

When you can see what you have in common with the other side, then you can start to sort out the facts and determine the key priorities.

- ➔ Why does each person think what they think?
- ➔ Is there outside information that could influence or persuade them otherwise?
- ➔ Why do you think what you think?

Finding common ground makes compromise easier, since the other person's perspective can feel relatable and reasonable, and you realize that person is more like you than you thought.

3. Don't blow up (and if you do, leave)

It's really hard to agree with or give in to someone you're mad at. The more worked up you are, the more defensive you get and the less listening you do.

Not only will you be damaging the relationship if you blow up at the other person, but you also won't be getting

any closer to a resolution. It is a waste of everyone's time. It is easy to lose your temper when you get frustrated or feel like you aren't being heard (or understood)—but this is such an important lesson to remember. You have to keep your cool.

If either you or the other person is losing it, walk away. Explain that you need to take a break, and come back later. If need be, apologize and then come back to the question when you have a cooler head and are more likely to be thinking logically.

4. Focus on the facts (not the perceptions)

You might think you know why a person has a certain opinion or why they do their work a certain way, but don't assume. Chances are, you are wrong, and, besides, nobody takes kindly to hearing what other people think of them (especially if they are worked up and frustrated).

The best thing you can do during a conflict is to focus on the facts. Speak only for yourself. Avoid saying things like, "We all think..." or "You're just saying that because...." Instead, talk about your experience, your knowledge, and the facts at hand.

Try to take as much emotion and projection out of it as possible, and just look at what is in front of you.

- ➡ What is the goal?
- ➡ What are the possible solutions?
- ➡ How can we measure each of them?
- ➡ Do we have any experiences or resources we can draw on to get more information?
- ➡ How can we reach a compromise that acknowledges everyone's needs?

5. Repeat the other person's words back to them

In an argument, it can be tempting to reiterate your position again and again. We all want to feel that we are being heard, and when emotions are hot, it's hard to think beyond our own opinions.

The more you can listen to the other person, however, the more you will make them feel heard (which lowers the level of conflict) and the more you will understand their perspective (which will help you uncover what you need to know to find a workable resolution).

Repeating the other person's words back to them is a great way to do this.

When someone finishes making a point, you can acknowledge that you heard it by saying, "OK, that makes sense. Just to make sure I completely understand, you are saying..." and repeat their key points.

When people feel they are being heard, they are more likely to compromise because they feel like their perspective is being taken into account in the decision. (And feeling like they weren't being heard is likely what started the conflict in the first place.)

6. Stick with it and seek a conclusion

It can be tempting to implement the silent treatment or simply walk away when someone disagrees with you, but it's important to see the conflict through to resolution.

As painful as that might sound, imagine the alternative: seething frustration that drags on for hours, days, or even years, and damages your relationships with coworkers—and maybe even your reputation, if the blowup was big enough or causes enough long-term damage.

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One bad interaction can turn into a bad relationship, which can have wide-reaching negative impacts on your career. Better to get the situation resolved now, so you can all move on.

It might be tempting to throw up your hands and say, “We’ll never agree!” but it is better to seek a conclusion to the conflict than just to accept it. Maybe you ultimately will decide you and this other person just have to “agree to disagree,” but it is better to have that be a mutual decision than for one of you to walk away.

REMEMBER, IT’S ABOUT RESOLUTION, NOT WINNING. You don’t always have to agree 100 percent in order to perform well in your job. Don’t focus so much on winning that you turn into a sore loser if someone else appears to come out on top in the conflict.

Even if you don’t get your way, remember that at the end of the day, it is your job to be aligned with your team and do great work.

If you pout and phone in your work because you didn’t get your way, people will notice and they will remember—and that will make it even harder to get your way in the future.

If, however, you can work through a conflict, be a great teammate, and still produce great work, then you will become a respected authority on your team. The longer your track record of successfully managing and negotiating conflict, the better it will serve you in the long run than winning one fight.

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