

Skillbook

Managing Conflict

Communication
Skills



Mindtools

Managing Conflict

Skillbook

This Skillbook is published by Mind Tools Ltd.
21 Young Street, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH2 4HU.

Copyright © Mind Tools Ltd, 2025.
All rights reserved.

Version 6.0.

This Skillbook is protected by international copyright law. You may use it only if you are a Mindtools member or have received it under corporate license.

If you have any queries, please contact us at
mtecustomerservices@mindtools.com.

Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Why All This Conflict?	2
3.	The Interest-Based Relational Approach	4
4.	Scenarios	7
5.	Suggested Solutions	11
6.	Key Points	13
7.	Apply This to Your Life	14

1. Introduction

Many of us experience conflict at work, and this isn't necessarily a bad thing. It can stimulate ideas, spark creativity, and encourage personal improvement. These are all at the heart of good business practice.

However, if you want to help your people work together productively, you need to know how to manage conflict before it gets out of hand.

When you have confidence in your conflict management skills, you won't be afraid of confrontation, and you won't back away from disagreements. Instead, you'll approach them positively and openly.

Your goal is to manage conflict, rather than eliminate it. This involves making the most of conflict situations, and using them to increase understanding between people and find collaborative ways of working.

In this **Skillbook**, you'll learn how to manage conflict effectively in different situations.

You can explore how to identify and understand the causes of conflict, how to help other people who are experiencing conflict, and what skills to use when you find yourself in conflict.

Then, you'll have a chance to analyze two conflict scenarios, and decide the best course of action for each.

In around one hour, we'll look at:

- Common sources of conflict.
- How to use the Interest-Based Relational Approach to manage conflict.
- How to respond when you are involved in conflict.
- Two conflict scenarios that you can use as an exercise, with suggested solutions.

2. Why All This Conflict?

When you have people with different values, backgrounds, education, and experience working together, you can expect some conflict.

Also, the way that people interpret events and develop relationships will be different. They may also have their own unique ideas about the best solutions to problems, which may conflict with their colleagues' views. Given all these differences, conflict in the workplace is inevitable.

However, it's important for these conflicts to surface. Team members who don't question the status quo are likely to be uncreative and uncompetitive, and they can be prone to decision-making blind spots.

Conflict also brings vibrancy, and it can spark innovative solutions. It forces you to see things differently and to start thinking creatively.

While there are people who seem to attract, and even instigate, conflict when none is necessary, most of the time it can be attributed to five sources. These are:

1. Personal Differences

Different expectations, perceptions, values, and beliefs can cause people to disagree. The emotional component of this type of conflict makes it a challenge to resolve.

Of course, some sources of conflict aren't productive or healthy. For example, jealousy and personality conflicts are toxic, and "office politics" can be destructive. It's important to deal with illegitimate conflicts like these quickly and decisively.

2. Conflicting Objectives

People can experience conflict because their objectives are different. For example, salespeople may want to be flexible to accommodate unusual customer requirements. At the same time, the production team may be under pressure to fulfill other orders and meet its targets, and this is helped by standardization. This difference in objectives could cause conflict.

3. Lack of Information

Missing information, misrepresentation, and miscommunication are all common sources of conflict within organizations.

4. Role Incompatibility

Conflict often arises when people's goals and responsibilities don't align with their expectations or values. Unfortunately, this type of conflict is difficult to foresee.

5. Environmental Conflict

Lack of resources and uncertainty are two major stressors, and they are therefore common sources of conflict. When people feel threatened, they either retreat and protect themselves, or fight back – and this can exacerbate other sources of conflict that may exist.

Although this type of conflict can be intense, it often goes away quickly once you remove the stressor.



3. The Interest-Based Relational Approach

To develop an effective strategy for resolving conflict, you need to know what causes it. Regardless of its nature, however, it's also important that you understand the other party's position. After all, in many situations, you'll likely have to deal with that person again in the future, so it makes sense to preserve your relationship with them.

Roger Fisher and William Ury developed the IBR approach and published it in their 1981 book, "[Getting to Yes](#)."

When you use this approach:

- **Your first priority is to protect the relationship:** the quality of the relationship must be maintained at all times.
- **You see the person and the problem as separate entities:** you recognize that the individual is not "being difficult" – the problem is.
- **You listen first, and talk second:** to solve a problem, you have to understand where the other person is coming from, before you can defend your own position.
- **You pay attention to the other person's interests:** find out why they have taken the position that they have.
- **You explore options together:** be open to the idea that other solutions may exist, and that you can get to these with the person concerned.
- **You set out the "facts":** seek to identify and agree upon the objective, observable elements that will impact the decision.

Using the Interest-Based Relational Approach

There are five core steps that you follow to use the IBR approach to conflict management. Let's look at them in detail:

Step One: Set the Scene

This is where you establish "ground rules" with the other person. Using the IBR approach ensures that both parties can be assertive without being aggressive, and also be respectful, open and cooperative with one another.

Active listening is a key skill throughout the conflict resolution process. Take some time to discuss the importance of great communication, and recognize that miscommunication is a common source of conflict in itself. You certainly don't want to add to your difficult situation by failing to be clear and upfront with one another.

Step Two: Gather Information

With a basic understanding of the conflict, and with the ground rules in place, you must now understand your position, and that of the other person. What needs or interests are at the root of the conflict? How do your needs and motivations impact the other person?

This step requires a great deal of discussion, and is based on mutual trust and honesty. Before you meet with the other person, fully prepare your own position, and make sure that you truly understand what is motivating you. This will help you to clarify your needs, and you'll be able to identify areas where you are in danger of being unreasonable or unfair.

Step Three: Agree on the Problem

During your initial discussion, it's vital that you agree on what the problem is. Even a minor difference in perspective can throw conflict resolution discussions off course.

Go through each of your lists of issues and concerns, and make sure that you both have a solid and agreed understanding of what is causing the problem, and what each person needs for a win-win solution.

Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions

Now you can work together to find a solution that allows both of you to get what you need.

Remember, don't aim for a compromise situation, where someone leaves the table feeling that they gave something up. Instead, look for a solution where everyone wins. The best way to find this type of solution is to get everyone together to brainstorm ideas.

At this stage in the IBR process, you need to keep an open mind – do not allow yourself, or others involved, to get so attached to one possible solution that all others are cast aside.

Step Five: Negotiate a Solution

By this stage, the conflict might be resolved. Both sides may understand the other's position better, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be obvious.

However, if you can't agree on the best way forward, you may need to use a technique like Win-Win Negotiation to decide on the best solution.

With this, there may be some trading of positions. However, the end result should still be a win for both sides, and no one should feel that they have compromised on anything important.

Note:



The IBR approach is an effective way to resolve conflict if you are personally involved as one of the protagonists. But you can also share the details with your team members or others to help them to resolve their differences .

Initiator or Receiver?

In a conflict situation, you can only control your own actions and responses, whether you are the **initiator** or the **receiver**. So, it's important to know how to manage conflict from both positions.

The information below can help you to understand your position, and to establish some of the groundwork before embarking on the IBR approach.

Initiator:

If you're the initiator, your goal is to maintain ownership of the problem. First, you need to identify the cause of your frustration; otherwise you risk simply venting anger. This may make you feel better in the short term, but it won't resolve anything. And, if you haven't identified the real cause of the problem, you may lose credibility.

- Start by describing the problem clearly and concisely. For example, "When you do X, Y happens, which makes me feel Z."
 - Name the behavior that is bothering you (X).
 - Identify the undesirable consequence of that behavior (Y).
 - Describe how you feel when that happens (Z).
- Remain objective, and avoid making assumptions about the other person's motivations. Remember, they probably aren't acting to spite you!
- Make yourself understood.
- Encourage open dialogue.
- Focus on one issue at a time, particularly if the problem is complex.
- Look for common ground to base a solution on.

Receiver:

As the receiver, your goal is to show concern and a genuine interest in finding a solution, particularly when **your** behavior is the perceived problem. This requires an empathic response that shows the initiator you understand their perspective.

- **Seek more information.** Ask for specific examples of the behavior in question.
- **Find something you can agree with.** Even if you disagree that you've behaved in a certain way, try to validate some part of the other person's position, to show that you're open to collaboration.
- **Ask for the other person's suggestions.** This shifts the discussion positively, and allows you to search for a win-win solution together.

Whether you're the initiator or the receiver, it's important to ensure that everyone agrees upon a plan. Seek to verify your understanding of the issue, confirm your commitment to resolving it, take action, and, where necessary, make a plan to make changes and measure progress.

4. Scenarios

In this section, we look at two different scenarios. Think about how you can resolve the conflict in each, and answer the questions that follow.

Scenario 1

You are the sales manager for a technology supplier.

Your market comprises small to medium-sized businesses in a large city. Your organization is moderately successful, but there is a large market out there that you are not targeting aggressively. When the company hires a new president, it quickly becomes clear that she isn't content with "status quo" performance – she wants to see an increase in sales, and you need to deliver.

You believe that the key obstacle is the company's credit policy, which is very restrictive. New customers have to complete a lengthy credit application, the credit manager only approves low-risk clients, and the terms are much more stringent than your main competitors'.

You tell the credit manager that his approach loses the firm customers, and you demand that he relax the credit terms and conditions. He angrily disagrees, accusing you of ignorance and potentially exposing the company to more risk.

You report your differences to the new president. She wants you to work with the credit manager to create a program that is attractive to customers while protecting the company from high credit risks. The president isn't prepared to take sides, so you need to come up with a solution together.

Question 1:

What are your underlying needs and concerns?

Question 2:

How are they congruent and incongruent with the credit manager's? What common ground can you find?

Question 3:

How would you approach the situation? Do you have a solution to suggest? Suggest your part of the dialogue.

Scenario 2

You are the manager of an auditing team in a large, international accounting firm.

You have been asked to set up a new team in France. However, your relationship with your colleague Chen is tense. He has always been more senior than you, but you were promoted over him and asked to set up this new team. You believe that you received the promotion because of your experience of working with international clients.

Chen's perspective is rather different. He thinks you were promoted because the company wants more younger people in senior positions. He's been openly hostile since you started your new role, and he tries hard to make you feel like an outsider.

Since your promotion, you've received several complaints about Chen from other team members. Instead of taking on a mentoring and leadership role appropriate to his knowledge and experience, he's been bossing people around.

After you return from France, you assign Chen to work with a small firm in a remote location that has notoriously difficult records to audit. You know that senior auditors are usually given choice assignments, but you're short staffed and you need an experienced team member on the case... and it'll be nice to have a break from Chen.

You hear a knock at the door and a furious Chen bursts in. He starts yelling, "What the heck do you think you're doing? You're not going to get away with undermining my status by giving me the worst assignments.

"I've been sent out of the office more than my fair share the past few months, and I'm sick of it!

"Since your promotion, you've been doing everything you can to disrespect me and keep me, your 'rival,' out of the office, so you can claim all the glory for yourself.

"All this is a 'power play' and you're not going to win! You don't even deserve the promotion you got. It's just because you're younger that you're sitting in the boss's seat and I'm not. I'm not going to tolerate this kind of treatment any more!"

Chen demands that you change his assignment immediately and apologize for the way you've been treating him. He's also going to make a formal complaint to head office, and he's prepared to resign if there isn't any improvement immediately.

Question 1:

What are your motivations, interests and responsibilities in this conflict?

Question 2:

What are Chen's motivations, interests and responsibilities?

Question 3:

What approach do you recommend using, and how will you reach a solution? Do you have a solution to suggest?



5. Scenarios: Suggested Solutions

Scenario 1: Suggested Solution

What are your underlying needs and concerns?

My boss is expecting me to increase sales to meet my personal performance objectives. I also need to look out for the best interests of the company and not promote a credit program that is too risky.

My sales team is expecting me to provide the support and resources it needs to reach its targets, too. I want to keep people satisfied and motivated, so I need to find a way to resolve this credit issue so that everyone wins and the organization doesn't assume unnecessary risk.

How are they congruent and incongruent with the credit manager's? What common ground can you find?

Congruence: The credit manager also wants to limit the company's exposure to risk. That is part of his performance expectations. As a support function, the credit manager should also be concerned that the sales people have strong and competitive tools, so that they can continue to bring in business.

Incongruence: The credit manager is "in safe mode," and is accustomed to the average/status quo existence. Protecting this safety means an easy job for him. The lower the risk, the better he performs, which is directly opposite to me.

Common ground: We both want the company to remain profitable, and we both want to support the sales staff. We both want to meet our performance objectives.

How would you approach the situation? Do you have a solution to suggest? Suggest your part of the dialogue.

The issue is key here, so a collaborative, win-win approach would be ideal. And as the initiator, it is important that I start with a problem identification statement.

"The credit terms we are using are very rigid and, as a result, we are losing sales and our reputation is suffering. I'm frustrated with the situation and would like to sit down to work out a solution.

"Neither of us wants to open the company up to undue risk. I'm hoping there is a solution that helps us both meet our objectives. I would like to propose that we relax the credit terms for a set period, and that we are each measured on credit risk and sales as part of our objectives. That makes us equally

accountable, and we have to work together to find a balance that allows us to remain competitive, while not tipping the credit scales too much.”

Scenario 2: Suggested Solution

What are your motivations, interests and responsibilities in this conflict?

I want to stop Chen from making my life difficult. I want him to start respecting my authority and stop undermining me. I also want to ensure that we have the necessary skill and talent in this new team to meet the demands of our client. I need Chen to act like a leader and help develop the skills of the team, instead of being so self-serving.

I’m responsible for avoiding the issue. I preferred to send Chen away instead of dealing with the situation assertively. My inaction has led to the escalation of this conflict, and now I risk losing the most experienced and skilled member of the team.

What are Chen's motivations, interests and responsibilities?

Chen wants respect. He also wants some recognition for his expertise and validation that he’s still valuable to the company. Right now he’s interested in revenge, and this is causing him to behave immaturely and unprofessionally. He is very self-centered, and isn’t acting in the best interests of the company. He has also chosen to avoid the conflict instead of confronting it, and it has been allowed to fester for far too long.

What approach do you recommend using, and how will you reach a solution? Do you have a solution to suggest?

Both the relationship and the issue are important, so working toward a win-win solution is key. The common ground is a desire to succeed. For both of us this means making the new team a success. We could start by talking about what’s bothering us. Chen, as the initiator, should go first, and I should encourage him to talk about how he’s feeling. There’s a good chance that we can work things out when we both get our feelings out in the open.

A solution might be to add mentoring/developing staff as an official part of Chen’s role. This will help him feel valued, and it will also address the skill gap. Chen should not go on these assignments alone: he should be training others at the same time. Eventually, his work should be done out of town, on an “as needed” basis.

It’s also important that the communication be open and honest in the office. Agreeing to start afresh might be a good way to neutralize the resentment, and, as Chen starts feeling more valued, he will likely feel less bitter.

6. Key Points

Conflict in the workplace can destroy good teamwork. And, if it's managed in the wrong way, real and legitimate differences between people can spiral out of control, resulting in situations where cooperation breaks down and the team's mission is threatened.

However, if it's handled properly, conflict can be constructive, lead to creative solutions, and help people to work together productively.

This **Skillbook** looked at the key points you should consider when managing conflict:

- Understanding the causes of conflict.
- Using the Interest-Based Relational approach to conflict resolution, following the five recommended steps: setting the scene; gathering information; agreeing on the problem; brainstorming solutions; and negotiating a solution.
- How to respond when you are involved in conflict as initiator or receiver.

8. Apply This to Your Life

Think about what you learned about conflict management from this **Skillbook**. How can you apply this to your own experience?

- How do you handle conflict?
- Are you able to adapt your strategy to the situation you are facing?
- Are you more often a conflict initiator or receiver? Why do you think that is?
- What specific conflict management skills do you need to develop? How will you do that?

