Template
Conflict Resolution

This template helps you to clarify, address and solve conflicts between you and a team member or colleague. Use it as soon as you see conflict developing, focusing on clarification and resolution. After resolving the conflict, you can then reflect on what you've learned, and what you can do differently in future.

Step 1: Clarify

First, you need to clarify the sources of the conflict. Generally, workplace conflicts fall into two types:

- **Personality conflicts** happen between individuals. They're driven by emotions such as anger, stress and frustration, caused by personality clashes and differing values. They're often destructive to team dynamics.
- **Substantive conflicts** are related to disagreements about tasks, processes, ideas, or decisions rather than personalities. Managed properly, they can be beneficial, leading to better outcomes and innovation.

Reflect on the conflict you're dealing with, and whether it's personality-based, or substantive. Ask yourself these questions, and for each one tick the box for the best answer.

1. What is the primary source of tension?

☐ a. Personal issues (values, traits, communication styles).

☐ b. Task-related issues (goals, methods, decisions).

2. When discussing the conflict, what does the conversation focus on?

☐ a. Personal feelings, past grievances or character assessments.

☐ b. Specific work issues, projects or decisions.

3. Is the conflict limited to specific projects or tasks, or persistent across all interactions?

☐ a. Persistent across different contexts and situations.

☐ b. Limited to specific work situations.

4. What emotions are most prominent in the conflict?

☐ a. Personal annoyance, resentment or dislike.

☐ b. Frustration about work outcomes or processes.

5. Do negative emotions dissipate when the work issue is resolved?

☐ a. No, tensions remain even after work issues are addressed.

☐ b. Yes, tension decreases after work issues are addressed.

6. Are personal criticisms or character judgments part of the conflict?

☐ a. Yes, criticisms often target personal traits or character.

☐ b. No, disagreements focus on ideas or approaches.

7. How do communications typically unfold?

☐ a. Generalized complaints or emotional expressions.

☐ b. Focused on specific issues with examples and evidence.

8. Is the communication style different in this conflict compared to other professional interactions?

☐ a. Yes, communication becomes more emotional, defensive or hostile.

☐ b. No, communication remains professional and task-focused.

9. Are conversations productive even when disagreeing?

☐ a. No, conversations often reach an impasse or become circular.

☐ b. Yes, disagreements still move the work forward.

10. What types of solutions have been effective in the past (if any)?

☐ a. Improving interpersonal communication.

☐ b. Clarifying expectations, processes or decision-making authority.

11. Do compromises or solutions tend to last?

☐ a. No, similar conflicts reappear in different contexts.

☐ b. Yes, once the specific issue is resolved, conflict diminishes.

12. What happens when you focus on the task/work issues?

☐ a. Underlying tension remains, regardless of task resolution.

☐ b. Tension decreases and productive work resumes.

Step 2: Analyze

Divide your responses to the twelve questions into a and b.

- More a than b: this is mainly a **personality** conflict.
- More b than a: this is mainly a **substantive** conflict.
- The same number of a and b: this is a **mixed** conflict.

Don't worry if the outcome is not clear-cut. Conflicts are often complex. The point is to get a general sense of the nature of the conflict and how to tackle it.

Using your results, you can move on to resolving the conflict. Don't let tensions build; have a direct conversation within a few days of noticing the issue.

Make time to talk to the person you're in conflict with. Give them space to explain their perspective without interrupting or getting defensive.

Use objective, language focused on the issue, and acknowledge the other person's point of view.

Discuss the following areas. Select the most relevant guidance based on the nature of the conflict you identified in Step 2.

Primarily personal

- Specific actions and their impact rather than character traits or personal attributes.
- Your respective preferred communication styles.
- Your personal boundaries in the workplace.
- Goals and values you have in common.

Primarily substantive

- Exactly what you're disagreeing about, separated from opinions or assumptions.
- Facts, metrics, examples, and evidence to support different perspectives.
- What success looks like for the project, team, or organization.
- How you'll evaluate options and who has final authority.

Mixed conflict

- Distinguish between task-related disagreements and personality issues before addressing either.
- Start by addressing substantive issues, as they are easier to resolve.
- Once you've made progress, address how communication styles or approaches might be creating additional tension.

You can now move on to draft an action plan, again focusing on the nature of the conflict.

- For personality conflict, plan to build relationships and improve communication between you.
- For substantive conflict, schedule regular, focused meetings to address specific issues.
- For mixed conflict, prioritize which elements to tackle first.

Step 3: Act

Based on your analysis in Step 2, plan your next steps. Make notes of what you need to prepare, and your desired outcome

1. For substantive conflict:

- Schedule a focused meeting to address specific work issues.

- Preparation:

- Desired outcome:

2. For personality conflict:

- Plan for relationship building or communication improvement.

- Specific actions:

- Support needed:

3. For mixed conflict:

- Prioritize which elements to address first:

- Approach:

Step 4: Follow up

Ideally, you want to prevent the conflict from breaking out again, so build a follow-up meeting with the person you are in conflict with, after an agreed period.

Record anything further you agree to do, and reflect on the process so that you've put what you've learned into practice in future.

Plan to reassess in: [   ] (days/weeks)

Notes from follow-up meeting.

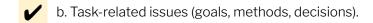# Conflict Resolution Template: Completed Example

Background

Sarah, a marketing manager, has been experiencing conflicts with Alex, a creative designer on her team. They're working on a major product launch campaign, and tensions have been escalating for three weeks. Sarah has decided to use the Conflict Resolution Template to better understand the nature of their conflict before addressing it.

Step 1: Clarify

Having answered all twelve questions, Sarah got these results.

1. What is the primary source of tension?

- [ ] a. Personal issues (values, traits, communication styles).
- [✔] b. Task-related issues (goals, methods, decisions).

Notes: the conflict primarily emerges around campaign design approaches and timeline management for deliverables.

2. When discussing the conflict, what does conversation focus on?

- [ ] a. Personal feelings, past grievances or character assessments.
- [✔] b. Specific work issues, projects or decisions.

Notes: Discussions typically center on specific design elements and project deadlines.

3. Is the conflict limited to specific projects or tasks, or persistent across all interactions?

- [✔] a. Consistent across different contexts and situations.
- [ ] b. Limited to specific work situations.

Notes: While the conflicts appear task-focused, Sarah notices that tensions with Alex occur across multiple projects, not just the current campaign.

4. What emotions are most prominent in the conflict?

✔ a. Personal annoyance, resentment or dislike.

☐ b. Frustration about work outcomes or processes.

Notes: Alex often seems personally offended by feedback and becomes defensive quickly, beyond what the situation warrants.

5. Do negative emotions dissipate when the work issue is resolved?

✔ a. No, tensions remain even after work issues are addressed.

☐ b. Yes, tension decreases after work issues are addressed

Notes: Even after agreeing on a design approach, Alex remains cold and minimal in communications.

6. Are personal criticisms or character judgments part of the conflict?

✔ a. Yes, criticisms often target personal traits or character.

☐ b. No, disagreements focus on ideas or approaches.

Notes: Alex has made comments like "You marketing managers are all the same – you don't understand creative processes" and Sarah has thought "Alex is impossible to work with and deliberately misses deadlines."

7. How do communications typically unfold?

☐ a. Generalized complaints or emotional expressions.

✔ b. Focused on specific issues with examples and evidence.

Notes: Sarah makes efforts to keep feedback specific to design elements rather than generalizing.

8. Is the communication style different in this conflict compared to other professional interactions?

✔ a. Yes, communication becomes more emotional, defensive or hostile.

☐ b. No, communication remains professional and task-focused.

Notes: Sarah notices that she's more terse with Alex than with other team members, and that Alex's tone is often sarcastic in their exchanges.

9. Are conversations productive even when disagreeing?

✔ a. No, conversations often reach impasses or become circular.

☐ b. Yes, disagreements still move the work forward.

Notes: Meetings frequently end without clear resolutions, requiring additional discussions later.

10. What types of solutions have been effective in the past (if any)?

✔ a. Mediation, team-building or improving interpersonal communication.

☐ b. Clarifying expectations, processes or decision-making authority.

Notes: The only improvement came after a team lunch where Sarah and Alex had casual conversation outside the work context.

11. Do compromises or solutions tend to last?

✔ a. No, similar conflicts reappear in different contexts.

☐ b. Yes, once the specific issue is resolved, conflict diminishes.

Notes: Even when they agree on one design element, tension reappears with the next task.

12. What happens when you focus on the task/work issues?

✔ a. Underlying tension remains, regardless of task resolution.

☐ b. Tension decreases and productive work resumes.

Notes: Even when specific task issues are resolved, interactions remain strained.

Step 2: Analyze

Question	Answer
1	b
2	b
3	a
4	a
5	a
6	a
7	b
8	a
9	a
10	a
11	a
12	a
Total a	9
Total b	3

With 9 indicators pointing to a personality conflict and 3 suggesting substantive conflict, the assessment clearly shows that this is primarily a relationship conflict that manifests in work disagreements, rather than genuine substantive differences about the work itself.

The conflict appears task-focused on the surface, but the underlying dynamics suggest personality-based tension. Key indicators include:

- Persistence across different projects.
- Emotional responses disproportionate to the work issues.
- Personal criticisms rather than idea-focused critique.
- Lack of resolutions even when specific tasks are addressed.

Step 3: Act

Based on the assessment, Sarah develops the following action plan.

For personality conflict:

1. Plan for relationship-building or communication improvement.

2. Specific actions:

> a. Consider scheduling a one-on-one coffee meeting outside the office to reset the relationship and discuss communication preferences, without discussing the current project.
> b. Develop and share a clear decision-making framework for the project to reduce ambiguity.
> c. Make a conscious effort to acknowledge Alex's creative expertise and provide positive feedback alongside constructive criticism.
> d. Consider restructuring workflows to give Alex more creative autonomy.

3. Support needed:

> Consider having HR facilitate a structured conversation about working styles and communication preferences. Sarah would do this only as a last resort, and only with Alex's consent.

Step 4: Follow up

Plan to reassess in: 2   (days/weeks)

Notes from follow-up meeting:

> *I've learned some important information about the way Alex likes to communicate. He prefers face to face meetings where he can talk over ideas freely. Email is not a medium he deals with well. I also need to work harder to understand his free-ranging approach to creative work, and rein in my tendency to micro-manage. I also need to be less prescriptive and more collaborative in my feedback.*
>
> *In return, Alex has undertaken to focus on the big picture of the campaign, and not get bogged down in small specifics of the design. We both want the campaign to be a success, and remain committed to its goals and those of the team.*