

# Can We Call a Truce?

## Tips for Negotiating Workplace Conflicts

Whether two employees are fighting or a disgruntled board member is on the verge of leaving, help solve the problem with these tricks of the trade.

Conflict happens. Disputes can arise between employees, board members, or collaborating partners. And if such issues aren't settled, bad things can happen. Good people quit. Relationships dissolve. Great organizations go under. This is more true today than ever before.

"In a world where relationships matter more than ever, mediation skills matter more than ever," says Jeffrey Kravis, author of *Improvisational Negotiation* (Jossey-Bass, josseybass.com, improvisationalnegotiation.com, firstmediation.com). "So it's critical to learn the art of bringing harmony out of conflict."

What, exactly, is negotiation? Kravis says it's reframing a situation so that people shift their positions in a way that makes resolution possible. You needn't be a certified mediator to settle a dispute. You just need to understand some basics about human behavior, practice the fine art of paying attention, and offer yourself up as

You have to get through the conflict phase to find the solution.

a neutral party who wants to resolve the problem. To do so, use these insights from Kravis:

**Let people tell their stories.** When people are upset about something, they *need* to get their stories out. This is a basic principle of mediation, and one that's important to remember when resolving a conflict with an angry employee, board member, or other associate. Feeling they've "been heard" can dramatically change angry people's outlooks. Plus, as they tell their stories, new information may come to light that allows a solution to emerge.

**Learn to "read minds."** Mind reading isn't magic. It's a combination of observation and intuition, which is born of experience. You

can learn a lot about how each party sees a dispute by paying attention to body language and the emotional tone behind people's words. Once you see things from their point of view, you can anticipate how they might react and manage negotiations accordingly. (See "Three Quick Tricks for Reading Minds" on page 13.)

**When people are picking flyspecks out of pepper, provide a reality check.** Warring parties are often so focused on minutiae that they lose sight of the big picture. Pull their attention away from the grain of sand onto the whole beach.

**Identify the true impediment.** In every conflict, ask yourself: What's the true motivating factor here? What's *really* keeping this person from agreeing to a solution? Identifying the obstacle helps you predict how the person will respond to certain ideas, which will help you shape negotiations.

**Think creatively about ways**



people can cooperate rather than clash. In every negotiation, there's tension between the desire to compete and the desire to cooperate. Be on the lookout for signals that support a cooperative environment. That's where the most creative solutions are born.

Be on the lookout for signals that support a cooperative environment.

**Edit the script.** Help people see not someone "winning" but both parties working toward a mutual goal. One way to do so is to *edit their scripts*—retell their stories about the dispute in a positive, forward-looking way, giving them the words to see their options in a new light.

**Avoid the "winner's curse" by carefully pacing negotiation.** It's possible to reach a solution too quickly. We all have an inner clock that lets us know how long a negotiation should take. When a deal seems too easy, a kind of buyer's remorse can set in, leaving people with second thoughts about the outcome. Don't rush the dance or the negotiation will fail.

**Realize that every conflict can't be solved.** There are times you have to accept that both parties are going to leave the table unhappy. You'll know in your gut when that time has arrived. Isolate the participants if possible, and move on. ■

## RESOURCES

Angelica, Marion Peters, "Eight Steps to Managing Conflict," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 4.

Lauer, Larry, "How to Manage Internal Conflict," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 6.

Muehreke, Jill, "What's Your Personality Type?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 5.

Natoli, Vincent, "The Organizational Personality & Employee Performance," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 1.

These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members).



## Three Quick Tricks for Reading Minds

Knowing what people are thinking and feeling can help you build rapport and resolve conflicts. Here are a few tips from master mediator Jeffrey Krivis to get you started:

**Notice body language cues.** People can tell you a lot about what they're thinking and feeling without ever saying a word. When they fidget or fail to make eye contact, they may be feeling insecure. When they turn their body away from you, keep their arms crossed, and display facial tension, they're probably on the defensive. When they cast their eyes downward or to the left, they're most likely deceiving you.

**Listen carefully to determine people's "type." Then speak their language.** According to the principles of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), there are three types of people: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, depending on how they learn best. When you know what categories people fall into, you can build rapport with them.

**Visual** people say things like "Can we look into this further?" and "I'm getting a clearer picture now."

**Auditory** types might say "I hear you loud and clear" or "Now that you've voiced your opinion, here's what would resonate with me."

**Kinesthetic** people tend to say such things as, "That feels right to me" or "I'm not grasping what you're telling me." If people seem emotionally "shut down," they're probably kinesthetic types as well.

"The words people use reveal a lot about how they make sense of the world around them," says Krivis. Determine what learning focus people have, and you can connect with them by using the same words and phrases they use.

**Use props to put people at ease and draw them out.** In his conference room, Krivis has an electric guitar signed by Bob Dylan. When a person immediately notices it, Krivis knows that person's an "auditory." "Visuals" are drawn to his crystal ball. "Kinesthetics" seem to be snared by his pictures of President John F. Kennedy (who tends to evoke strong emotion in people) and a touching photo of people holding hands at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral.

These props serve several purposes, says Krivis. Yes, they help him identify people's learning styles so he can bond with them and negotiate more effectively. But also, props serve as icebreakers. "Whether you're a mediator or not, it's a good idea to put people at ease or make them laugh," he notes. "It's just a matter of social grace."