



# How to Have a Constructive Conflict

Use these ground rules to turn conflict from a scourge to a positive.

*By Chris Ciardello*

**W**orkplaces are full of diverse personalities who communicate in unique ways. These personality differences are what make conflict resolution an uncomfortable and touchy subject.

But it's also through such differences that creative ideas are born. Everyone sees the world in a different light, and joining those perspectives is a great collaborative strategy for problem-solving. That's why you should discuss conflict resolution clearly with your team. It's also why conflicts shouldn't be avoided but, rather, resolved in a structured way.

The first step to deal with conflict is to bring both parties together and have a meeting of the minds. The parties involved in the discord need to sit down and talk.

Before this meeting, the ground rules need to be explained. There are four ground rules to successful conflict resolution.

**Rule #1:** Each side must listen fully to the other before responding. The first person listens to what the other person has to say, and then the second person has the opportunity to talk. This process is repeated until both sides have made their case.

Often, when one party is explaining something that's bothering them, the second party will feel defensive and want to jump in. There's nothing more frustrating than having someone interrupt you when you're trying to resolve a problem and explain your side. People who interrupt are more interested in making their own points than in truly listening.

Make it plain that interrupting won't be allowed. Urge both sides to open their minds so they can listen fully.

**Rule #2:** Identify the issues clearly, professionally, and concisely. Unless the issues are identified, a resolution can't be found. For example, Kailey may have snapped at her co-worker Mark because she got a frustrating text from her son. Her irritation has nothing to do with Mark, but the tension can simmer and build to a boil unless the two co-workers discuss the matter.

If you wonder why a co-worker is acting a certain way, don't jump to conclusions. You don't know what's going on in another person's life, so the best thing to do is ask.

**Rule #3:** When both parties meet to discuss their issues, they're allowed to use only "I" statements. Framing an issue with an "I" statement brings down the other person's defenses so that a resolution can be found. "You" statements put people on the defensive.

Try saying, "I felt ignored when I was trying to get my point across" rather than "You interrupted me when I was making my point." Try, "I get upset when I can't find the instruments I need" rather than "You always put the instruments back wrong."

When people get defensive, they stop hearing everything that's being said. They're focusing on how to defend their integrity. "I" statements diffuse anger and assault. When you bring the problem back to how it makes you feel, it brings people's guards down and a conversation can begin.

**Rule #4:** The final and most important rule is that there must be no personal attacks, name-calling, or finger-pointing. If people get upset and voices are raised, each side needs to pause (maybe even step aside for a few moments) to gain their composure so that a civil conversation may continue.

Having conflict in an office is okay; in fact, it's healthy. However, preventing it from becoming heated is crucial to avoid division. If a resolution can't be found with the two parties sitting down and talking, then it's time to bring in a mediator. Whoever it is, that person needs to remain as neutral as Switzerland. The mediator mustn't pick sides, and the same four ground rules apply. Everyone wants to work

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**Can We Call a Truce? Tips for Negotiating Workplace Conflicts** (Vol. 27, No. 6)

**Assess Your Work Style for Better Communication** (Vol. 37, No. 4)

**Increase Work-Group Productivity with Concescent Conversation** (Vol. 26, No. 3)

**Seven Kinds of Listeners & How to Approach Them** (Vol. 40, No. 2)

**How to Fix Communication Breakdowns** (Vol. 29, No. 1)

**Eight Steps to Managing Conflict** (Vol. 20, No. 4)

in a happy, peaceful environment, so it's important to find ways to make your conflicts as constructive as possible. 

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