

# Handling Change and Conflict

# Workshop 8

**B**ig changes are underway at Artown Hotel, which has been purchased by a large hotel chain. The lobby is being remodeled. A new restaurant is under construction. And Omar's housekeeping staff is in an uproar. Rumors of layoffs and other disasters are flying everywhere.

To squelch the hearsay, Omar calls a staff meeting. He's been assured that no layoffs are contemplated, he announces, and nobody will be transferred.

Also, he has checked the new health plan, and it's just as good as the old one. That takes care of three rumors.

He goes on to point out that the remodeling should attract a more upscale clientele, resulting in larger tips for everyone. The new management does expect, he admits, that rooms will be cleaned and ready for guests earlier in the afternoon. That means the whole staff should strive for greater efficiency.

At this point an argument erupts between Sylvia and Josue, who frequently have trouble getting along. "What's the problem?" Omar asks.

Sylvia complains that Josue's habit of hogging the service elevator for his carpet-cleaning equipment delays everyone else. "How can we be efficient in cleaning rooms," she grumbles, "if we can't get from one floor to the next?"

Josue retorts, "People who aren't so lazy use the stairs."

"Please, you two," says Omar, and he tells them to meet him later in his office. He ends the

staff session with an appeal for teamwork.

Afterward, he realizes that what

he's just seen may be an omen: the staff's small disagreements may intensify because of the stress of change.

He thinks about ways to make the transition period easier, and he tries to remember what he knows about handling conflicts between employees.



## What's Inside

*Here, you will learn to*

- ◆ help your employees deal with changes
- ◆ analyze conflicts between employees
- ◆ help employees resolve their conflicts

## Managing Change

In the early 1970s, the title of Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock* became a commonplace expression. It referred to people's difficulty in adapting to the rapid pace of change in modern culture. Today, technological and social developments are even more rapid than they were in the 1970s.

In business as well as personal life, changes often occur with dizzying speed. Many supervisors face situations like the one Omar encountered in the scenario you've just read. Reorganizations, mergers, software upgrades, new work rules, new team members—in some companies, it seems like the ground underfoot is always shifting.

A few people enjoy frequent change and adapt well to it. Most people, however, find rapid transformations unsettling. It's hard to feel calm and secure in the midst of a revolution!

As a supervisor, you'll discover that many of your employees need help in dealing with changes in their work environment. Here are some tips for assisting them:



- ◆ Begin to plan for the change as early as possible, and inform your employees well in advance.
- ◆ Explain exactly what is being changed and why.
- ◆ Discuss with your employees how the change will affect their lives.
- ◆ If possible, allow employees to participate in planning and/or implementing the change. As participants in the process, they will be more likely to accept the outcome—and they may have ideas that improve the results.
- ◆ Dispel unfounded rumors.
- ◆ Emphasize the benefits of the change.
- ◆ Be honest about what you know and what you don't know.
- ◆ When possible, introduce changes slowly, step by step, to allow employees to accustom themselves to the new system.
- ◆ Encourage employees to consult you about their problems and concerns.

“People involved in the decision-making process are more likely to accept change and support new ideas.”

— **MARY KAY ASH**

*Founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics*

## ACTIVITY 8.1

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Change and Motivation

Look back at the scenario at the beginning of this workshop. Imagine you're Omar, and you want to make sure the changes at the hotel have a positive effect on employee motivation. Suggest four specific methods you will use. (Hint: You can use the hierarchy of needs diagram in Workshop 5 to focus on methods of appealing to different levels of needs.)

Method 1:

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Method 2:

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Method 3:

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Method 4

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# The Nature of Conflict

Rapid change in people's working lives creates stress, which in turn often aggravates underlying conflicts. But even in stable situations, conflicts can disrupt an otherwise harmonious team. As a supervisor, you should try to understand the basis of conflicts and manage them in the best interests of the organization and of the people involved.



## Two Common Misunderstandings

As a first step in exploring conflict, let's clear up two common misunderstandings:

### Misunderstanding No. 1: Arguments Are Conflicts

A disagreement, in itself, is not a conflict. Even a loud argument isn't necessarily a conflict.

A conflict exists when people have different goals and they see each other as blocking the achievement of those goals. Say that Barbara and Ray argue about the best marketing method for a new product. If each is pursuing the goal of increasing sales for the company, they aren't in conflict—they want the same thing, they're just differing about how to get it.

Conversely, a conflict can exist without any overt sign of disagreement. Ray and Barbara may be so deeply opposed that they quietly sabotage each other's work, though on the surface they're scrupulously polite to each other.

### Misunderstanding No. 2: Conflict Is Always Bad for the Organization

Certainly, conflict can have many negative consequences. It can increase stress, undermine morale, reduce staff loyalty, and prevent the collaboration needed to do the job properly. But conflict can have some benefits as well.

In a dynamic organization, goals often contradict one another. Imagine that Barbara's job includes purchasing materials that Ray uses in his work. Barbara wants to save money for the firm by using inexpensive suppliers. Ray wants to be sure his work isn't compromised by inferior materials. Both goals are good for the company, and a certain amount of conflict between Ray and Barbara may help create a healthy balance between cost and quality.

Conflict can also help spark new and original ideas. It may spur employees to take greater initiative. It can help focus the staff on problems that need solution. Conflict that produces benefits of this sort is often called *constructive conflict*.

Your goal as a supervisor, then, should be not to eliminate conflict, but rather to manage it so that it becomes as constructive as possible, producing the most benefit and the least harm.

## Three Keys for Understanding Conflicts

When supervisors mishandle a conflict, the failure often occurs because they didn't really understand what was going on. Three key principles can deepen your understanding of conflicts among your employees:

### 1. Take full account of the personalities and backgrounds of the individuals involved.

Maybe Barbara and Ray are always having little spats—that's how they get along. In their case, it might be much more indicative of a conflict if they *stopped* sniping at each other. With some other employees, however, one sarcastic remark may be the sign of a deep conflict. You're likely to have all types of people working for you, and you need to be sensitive to their individual personalities.

### 2. Look for underlying goals and needs.

Employees may not tell you precisely what they're arguing about; they may not even know themselves. Use your experience with them and your insight into human nature to discern their underlying desires and fears.

### 3. Recognize the possibility of a “win-win” outcome.

Even when two people's goals seem mutually exclusive, there is often less opposition than you might think. For instance, Ray and Barbara may be in conflict over a promotion that only one of them can get. But if both of them value self-fulfillment more than mere status, there may be ways for both to feel satisfied. In a “win-win” outcome, both parties gain what they truly want, and neither feels like a loser.



## ? Did you know?

Most U.S. law schools now offer courses in dispute resolution, and hundreds of communities have centers where individuals and companies can seek help in resolving conflicts.



## ACTIVITY 8.2

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### Analyzing a Conflict

Think back to a two-person conflict you have witnessed in the past—at work, at school, or in your family. Then answer the following questions about it.

1. What was the conflict about on the surface? That is, what did the people say they were fighting or disagreeing about?

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2. What do you think were each person's underlying goals and needs?

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3. In handling the conflict, did both people manage to satisfy their goals and needs? To what extent?

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4. With the benefit of hindsight, can you describe a healthier way of resolving the conflict—one that would have better satisfied the underlying needs of both people?

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## Resolving Conflicts Constructively

Not every conflict needs your intervention. Again, you should be sensitive to the particular individuals involved. Sometimes the best technique is to let them handle matters on their own. Ask yourself: Can they reach a solution by themselves?

Will they settle the matter fairly, or is one person likely to ride roughshod over the other? Will they both remain committed to the job afterward?

In some cases, a private conversation with each person may be necessary. You can tell each party to the conflict that you're concerned about its disruptiveness and you would like to see it settled. That small intervention may give the employees enough motivation to resolve the matter.

At other times, however, you'll need to get deeply involved, sitting down with the parties to mediate a solution. In this event, the following techniques can help you resolve the conflict constructively:

- ◆ Make it clear that you expect the people to resolve their differences for the good of the organization.
- ◆ Encourage the parties to see the problem as a mutual one that they need to work together to solve.

- ◆ During the discussions, be sure they treat each other seriously and with respect.
- ◆ Urge them to express both their ideas and their feelings openly.
- ◆ State in your own words the issues and emotions involved, and ask both parties to correct you if you've misunderstood.

- ◆ When necessary, state your own opinions about what you've heard. You want to be fair, but that doesn't mean you have to be neutral on each point.

- ◆ Help the parties identify goals they share.

- ◆ Taking the shared goals into account, press the employees to discover possibilities for a "win-win" outcome, or at least a compromise in which each gets part of what he or she desires.

- ◆ As part of the solution, lead the parties to define specific changes they will make in their behavior.

- ◆ Be sure both parties commit fully to the agreed-upon solution.

When you help employees work through such a collaborative, problem-solving approach to a conflict, the process often strengthens their relationship with each other and with you. In the long run, you may find that the conflict proves beneficial to your team.



## ACTIVITY 8.3

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### Reviewing Change and Conflict

To review what you've learned about ways to handle change and conflict, answer the following true-false questions. Select the appropriate letter for each item.

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|--|---|---|
| 1. In resolving conflicts, facts are more important than emotions.   | T | F |
| 2. Supervisors shouldn't scare employees by telling them about planned changes too far in advance.                         | T | F |
| 3. A loud argument is not necessarily a sign of conflict.  | T | F |
| 4. Employees who participate in implementing change are more likely to support it and feel good about it.                  | T | F |
| 5. Conflict can spur creativity.   | T | F |
| 6. Whenever conflict occurs, the supervisor should take direct measures to resolve it.                                     | T | F |
| 7. If potentially disturbing changes must be made, they should be accomplished all at once, instead of in dribs and drabs. | T | F |
| 8. Identifying shared goals is a key step in resolving conflicts.  | T | F |
| 9. Effective supervisors try to eliminate all conflicts among team members.  | T | F |
| 10. Many work-related conflicts have "win-win" solutions.  | T | F |

1. F, 2. F, 3. T, 4. T, 5. T, 6. F, 7. F, 8. T, 9. F, 10. T





## GETTING CONNECTED

You can find a number of resources on conflict at the Conflict Resolution Network:

**<https://myqss.link/Conflict-Resolution>**

Resources on anger management can also be helpful for both you and your employees. The Mayo Clinic offers good advice:

**<https://myqss.link/Anger-Management>**

The American Psychological Association's article "*Controlling Anger—Before It Controls You*" is available at:

**<https://myqss.link/Anger-Control>**

## WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Supervisors can help employees cope with change by being frank and open, inviting employee participation in the change process, and introducing changes one step at a time.
- Conflicts between employees can be either beneficial or harmful, depending on how you manage them.
- Constructive conflict management involves helping the parties see the situation as a mutual problem, express their feelings honestly, and discover "win-win" solutions.