Workplace Strategies for Mental Health

Compliments of Canada Life

Workshop series



Participant handout

Resolving conflict

Notes:

Resolving conflict

In this session you are learning to facilitate the development of an agreement for professional interaction between two people in conflict. You'll start by engaging each person separately so they can give you their ideas for working together professionally.

Your task is to make sure they both provide strategies that address the existing and potential issues that may get in the way of working together professionally. You'll blend the best ideas into one agreement, which both parties will be required to sign and adhere to going forward.

Learning objectives

- Review a process that supports the dignity of all parties
- Develop an agreement focused on future behaviours

When this approach should not be used

- A simple conversation would work
- Discipline needs to happen
- An investigation needs to occur first

When this approach should not be used

- Emotions are high
- Conflict is long standing
- Complex situations

Assess your emotional intelligence

We all need the emotional intelligence to identify and respond to the emotions of those involved, as well as recognize and manage our own emotions, when we want to resolve conflict. To assess your current level of emotional intelligence, use the free Emotional intelligence skills assessment found on the Workplace Strategies for Mental Health website or another validated approach. Knowing your own level of emotional intelligence can help you focus your personal development efforts in the right areas.

Conflict resolution process

To begin, contact each party to explain the process and share the key questions you'll be asking. This gives the individuals time to think about their answers in advance. This also gives you the opportunity to express the intention of this process: to develop a new way of interacting professionally going forward. Both parties will be held to the agreement so that these issues don't continue to arise.

The key questions are:

- What do you need to work professionally with this person?
  - This is an opportunity to establish the behaviours you need you to work together without the stress.
- What will you do differently to contribute to a successful working relationship?
  - This establishes the actions you'll take to make sure the relationship stays professional.
- How will we deal with future issues?
  - This creates a process by which either of you can be respectfully reminded of your agreement before more serious consequences are applied, should future issues arise.

1. **Set up individual interviews** to provide a safe place to discuss the issues and develop a solution. This can help avoid the humiliation of feeling blamed or judged. Unlike standard mediation, in which both parties are brought together to discuss their issues, you'll meet with each employee separately and privately to explain the entire process and fully explore some key questions we'll review in more detail in a few minutes.

2. **Write up a reasonable and specific agreement** using as many of the suggestions as possible that were shared by both parties. The agreement should not make judgments about who's right or wrong. The final agreement applies equally to both parties regardless of rank. It's about how these individuals will interact at work rather than their roles or authority.

3. **Share the draft agreement with each party separately.** This gives the opportunity to comment on any part they can't live with and to explain why. You can make modifications at this time if necessary. This will ensure the agreement is acceptable to both parties before the facilitator brings them together to discuss.

4. **Review the agreement with both parties to ensure a shared understanding.** Both parties confirm in writing they'll follow the terms as a new way of interacting.

5. **Hold both parties accountable** to the agreement and include consequences if either is unable or unwilling to comply.

Scenario

The two employees used to do the same job, one was promoted to be the supervisor of the other. The presenting problem is that the employee and supervisor don't want to interact with each other at all. Each believe that the other one started the negative behaviours and its beginning to impact the entire team.

The supervisor believes that the employee is jealous of their promotion.
The employee believes that the supervisor is being condescending and hostile because they're insecure in their new position. Think of any example similar to this to help you take on the perspective of whichever role you choose.

Considerations before starting

Rule-out rule

Rule out the possibility of a health condition or disability impacting the behaviour of either party. Make sure the individual knows there are resources available if they need them. If necessary, proceed with your duty to accommodate before beginning this process or any disciplinary action.

Impact on co-workers

If the solution to the conflict between two people creates more conflict among others, it is not the most effective approach. Consider the impact on others before you begin, as you discuss potential solutions and while you are drawing up the agreement.

Additional techniques and resources

Some communication strategies that are helpful include:

- Listening for understanding
- Why blame and shame don't work
- Developing a workplace plan
- Supporting employee success
- Attribution error

Venting fears, concerns and frustrations

- Allow the opportunity to vent
- Do not agree or disagree
- Acknowledge distress if relevant
- Redirect to solutions when done

Before you say no, ask why

- What would you like to do about that?
- How can that be less stressful for you?
- What could make this better for everyone?
- I hear your frustration. I don't want work to be so stressful. What would that take?
- And what else?... And what else?
  - Rather than re-hashing what happened, focus on what needs to happen now

Experiencing the interview questions

The facilitator is the person asking the questions. Help the employee focus on behaviours that will eliminate conflict going forward. Don't agree or disagree with any blaming. Simply redirect the conversation to what needs to be different. Your goal is to uncover what this employee believes is necessary, in terms of workplace behaviours to maintain or restore a professional working relationship.

The employee is one of the parties to the conflict. Without naming names, think about anyone you've had conflict with in the past and use that relationship as the basis for the conversation without naming names. Think about what you would want to be different in terms of interactions with that person.

Question 1:

What do you need to work professionally with this person?

Question 2:

What will you do differently to contribute to a successful working relationship?

Question 3:

How will we deal with future issues?

What will you do differently?

Please record at least one thing that you will do differently at work as a result of what we have discussed today. We will take up the answers when you are done.

Sample workplace agreement

Note to facilitator:

The agreement is intended to be in the ‘voice’ of the two people who have been interviewed privately and separately.

The way it is written should not be academic or legalistic.

While you are ultimately responsible for the quality of the agreement in terms of being able to measure and hold accountable each person for the terms, the more that the agreement honors the voices of the two parties, the more likely they will feel comfortable and committed.

For more information about conducting a conflict resolution process that results in this type of agreement go to https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/managing-workplace-issues/resolving-conflict

This plan does not supersede any employee or employer rights including existing organizational policies, accommodation plans or applicable legislation. It is developed in good faith that all parties will conform to the spirit and intent of finding a way to ensure well-being and productivity at work.

To contribute to the success of the working relationship between Jamie and Ali, the following agreements should be honoured and monitored:

- Always speak in a calm voice.
- Keep body language open and relaxed while in conversation.
- Keep eye contact when talking with one other.
- Avoid any gestures, sounds, body language or words that may be interpreted as dismissive or passive aggressive.
- Regularly make sure each other understand new or important instructions or changes. This will be done in writing to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation.
- Listen without interrupting when the other person speaks and acknowledge and/or clarify what they say even if you don't agree.
- Wait until the other person has finished talking before formulating a response, even if you think you know what they're going to say.
- Present a united front by supporting each other and being professionally respectful, even when you don't agree, while in the company of other employees, including at team huddles or management meetings. This means you won't challenge or single out each other in meetings.
- Don't talk behind each other's backs in any way that is disparaging. Don't allow others to speak disparagingly about the other party to you, and let others know that you are working together to create a positive and healthy work environment.
- Discuss any disagreements, alternative ideas or constructive feedback, by setting up a weekly 10-minute check-in. For privacy, these will be set up in Jamie's office. This time should be spent clarifying concerns and setting priorities for the week. These meetings should also follow the established interaction guidelines. Bring up issues at the next scheduled check-in rather than at a later date.
  - Reschedule any issues that will take longer than 10 minutes to a time that is convenient for both parties.
  - When there are no issues to review, use the 10-minute weekly check-in to review this document to see how well it is working.
  - View issues as joint problems to be solved together rather than assigning blame or judgment. You both want to create a great workplace. Every issue is just a new opportunity to contribute something better.
- Make a regular effort to greet each other and engage in "small talk" to show concern for each other's welfare.

Ali and Jamie will continually strive for the following:

- To support the success of each other rather than point out problems or errors.
- Make sure there is a shared understanding of the intended outcomes and measure of success for each assigned task.
- Work together to solve problems and find a better way when struggling to reach goals.
- Discuss how changes will impact workloads and success on the job.

To assist in addressing future issues, Ali and Jamie can use the following process:

- Recognize that no one is perfect. Someone may be having a difficult day and not recognize how their bad mood may be impacting others.
  - This is not excusing inappropriate behaviour but giving that person a chance to recover.
  - If one party is not adhering to any of the above agreements, the other will give the benefit of the doubt that it's not intentional.
  - Ask, "Would you mind explaining that again?" Or, if the attitude is the problem, ask, "Can you tell me what you are thinking right now?" These statements allow the other person another chance to interact in a way that is both professional and respectful.
  - This approach is meant to be an exception and not a daily occurrence.
- If the above approach doesn't redirect the inappropriate behaviour, bring up the issue at the private 10-minute weekly check-in and not in front of others. By working together, Ali and Jamie can explore solutions to avoid the challenging issues.
- If working together toward a solution is not successful, then HR should be involved. At this point, HR should consider progressive discipline up to and including termination if appropriate.
  - This is not to be threatening, but to highlight the importance of a psychologically safe workplace for all.

The above document accurately describes our workplace agreement on November 5, 2020:

Ali Smith	Jamie Doe

This agreement is meant to provide a basis for ongoing conversations between two employees. Bothe employees endeavour to remain respectful, productive, contributing members of the workplace. In the beginning, this may feel awkward or require a lot of effort. But, if both parties are committed to change, the agreement will become easier to follow as time progresses. Ongoing reviews of the statements in this agreement will provide a starting point for discussions about work-related issues.

Notes:

Workplace Strategies for Mental Health

Compliments of Canada Life

Workplace Strategies for Mental Health resources are:

- For all employers, people leaders and employees
- Available in English and French
- Evidence- or practice-based
- Available to anyone at no cost

Examples of the resources available at clwsmh.ca/materials include:

Accommodation

Use these resources to address the practical, personal and organizational issues so you can support effective accommodation of an employee with a disability.

Being a mindful employee

Help employees understand their responsibility and opportunities to contribute to a mentally healthy workplace as described in the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety.

Building stronger teams

Use this free, downloadable workbook to help build team resilience. You can complete many of the activities in less than 15 minutes.

Harassment and bullying prevention

Address aggression or unresolved conflicts among co-workers before they escalate into a crisis in the workplace.

Ideas for resolving conflict at work

Use these ideas to help individuals resolve their own conflicts at work.

Protecting ourselves against bullying

People targeted by bullying need to cope until the issue is resolved. These strategies can reduce stress, improve perceptions and increase self-care.

Psychologically safe interactions

Use this slide presentation, facilitator guide and participant handout to engage your team in a workshop that increases awareness of how our behaviours may be interpreted as bullying, even when that wasn't our intention

Responding to issues

Use these practical and action-oriented guidelines to address work issues, including:

- Conflict
- Performance
- Accommodation
- Impairment
- Return to work
- Violence

All Workplace Strategies for Mental Health resources are available to anyone at no cost, compliments of Canada Life.

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