



Talking Through Conflict

WORKSHOP GUIDE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Conflict is more than honest, objective disagreement – that is a normal part of working in organisations. Conflict is a badly-handled, and often emotional, clash of different views. It consumes time and energy, and results in bad decisions.

Consequently, managing conflict requires skill, emotional intelligence and an ability to spot potential problems while they are still small enough to be resolved easily. These are the issues addressed in this programme.

FEATURED VIDEOS

- Early warning signs
- Preparing yourself for a conflict conversation
- How to open a conflict conversation
- Unexpected conflict
- Handling conflict conversations

INTRODUCTION

This guide will help you lead a short workshop featuring videos from the Video Arts' Management Conversations programme. Each video comes with a series of activities designed around the following structure:

Look – watch the video.

Think – reflect on the content and consider how the messages link to your own experience and goals.

Remember – summarise the key learning points.

These activities will take about 30 minutes to complete. At the end of the Guide is a practical exercise to help bring together all the learning points.

FILM 1 – EARLY WARNING SIGNS

LOOK (play video, 3 minutes)

Disagreement is part of working life and, when some people disagree, they do in a 'lively' manner. That is usually alright as long as all parties share the same style and the conversation is focused on work.

However, when the conversation starts to become personal, when one party's style becomes extreme or when the organisation's values (such as those relating to teamwork or respect for individuals) are ignored, the conversation is shift from disagreement to conflict.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

Ask the group to think about their own experiences of the early warning signs of conflict by discussing questions such as:

- Think of meetings and discussions you have attended during which participants disagreed with each other and list tactics they used. For example, did they point out genuine facts, use a calm tone, speak more loudly, use sarcasm, display exaggerated gestures or facial expressions, did they criticise each other personally, etc?
- List the tactics in ascending order from 'healthy disagreement' to 'serious conflict' at the other. Where, in the list, would disagreement end and conflict begin?
- When disagreement becomes conflict, what happens to the quality of decisions and the effectiveness of working relationships?

REMEMBER

In meetings and discussions, when people disagree, remember to:

- Spot the early warning signs of conflict.
- Distinguish between signs of conflict and healthy disagreement.

FILM 2 – PREPARING YOURSELF FOR A CONFLICT CONVERSATION

LOOK (play video, 3 minutes)

Like most things in life, conflict conversations are easier to handle when we prepare for them – not by psyching ourselves up for a fight but by using a rational approach that helps us stay calm and solution-orientated.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

Ask the group to think about how they can prepare themselves for conflict conversations by discussing questions such as:

- What happens in a conflict conversation if you have prepared by psyching yourself up, as if getting ready for a fight?
- Conversely, what happens if you obtain relevant facts and consider the issue from the 'bigger picture' perspective such as organisation/department goals, customer needs, the criteria a solution must meet to be acceptable to all parties?
- How useful can it be to objectively forecast the behavioural tactics the other party might use? What happens if you forecast them emotionally?

REMEMBER

When you anticipate that a disagreement could escalate into conflict:

- Obtain facts. You can use them to help keep the discussion rational rather than emotional.
- Use the 'bigger picture' to provide perspective.
- Use that perspective to identify the criteria a solution must meet to be acceptable to everyone.
- Forecast the behavioural tactics the other person might use; this will help you stay calm and rational if they do use them.

FILM 3 – HOW TO OPEN A CONFLICT CONVERSATION

LOOK (play video, 3 minutes)

How a conversation begins usually affects how it continues and, as conflict involves emotions, a skilled opening is crucial – it can help keep the conversation calm and solution-orientated.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

Help the group think about the importance of opening a conflict conversation skilfully by discussing questions such as:

- Why does the way someone opens a conversation affect how the other person responds?
- Think of examples, from both your personal and professional lives, in which the way a conversation was opened determined how it unfolded. What distinguished the good openings from the poor ones?
- If a conversation is likely to involve conflict, what happens if one party opens it a) aggressively, b) submissively and c) rationally?
- In what ways do being respectful, non-judgmental, introducing the bigger picture and involving the other party quickly help make an opening effective?
- What would you need to do with your body language (posture, gestures, tone of voice, facial expression and eye contact) to look calm and authoritative? To what extent would this body language help you feel calm and authoritative?

REMEMBER

When a conversation might involve conflict, a skilled opening is essential. So remember to:

- Open the conversation by being rational, respectful and non-judgmental.
- Introduce the bigger picture.
- Involve the other party quickly.
- Make sure your body language is calm and authoritative. That will not only strengthen your opening, it will also help you feel calm and authoritative.

FILM 4 – UNEXPECTED CONFLICT

LOOK (play video, 3 minutes)

When we initiate a conversation, we can plan a skilled opening. Sometimes, however, conflict comes unexpectedly. We are 'on the receiving end' and can only respond. As how we respond can affect how the conversation unfolds, we need to respond skilfully.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

Help the group think about how they can respond to unexpected conflict skilfully by discussing questions such as:

- What happens to people's emotions when conflict comes unexpectedly?
- How do those 'fight or flight' emotions affect the way they respond and what does that do to the conversation?
- What can you do to stay reasonably calm when conflict come unexpectedly?
- How useful can it be to:
 - 'Mirror' their emotional, angry state by 'giving as good as you get'?
 - Telling them to calm down or not to be so emotional?
 - Acknowledge, rather than ignore, their 'state'?
 - Signal you are willing to help?
 - Use rational, rather than emotional, words?

REMEMBER

When conflict appears suddenly and unexpectedly:

- Remember that you may need to protect your 'fight or flight' response.
- Respond by acknowledging the other person's state, and signal you are willing to help.
- Use rational words. They will help the other person respond rationally.

FILM 5 – HANDLING CONFLICT CONVERSATIONS

LOOK (play video, 3 minutes)

Once you have opened, or responded to, a conflict conversation, you need to steer it towards a satisfactory conclusion. This programme shows you an effective way of doing that.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

Help the group think about how they can steer a conflict conversation to a satisfactory conclusion by discussing questions such as:

- As conflict consumes time and emotion, and leads to poor decisions, how do other people usually feel about someone who is able to resolve the conflict quickly, amicably and skilfully?
- What have you noticed about people who are able to do that? What constructive tactics do they use?
- In reaching a solution that everyone can agree with, how important are the following behaviours:
 - Summarising the other party's views to show you understand them?
 - Providing context by referring to the bigger picture?
 - Inviting people to agree rather than dictating the solution?

REMEMBER

We respect people who can steer a conflict conversation to a satisfactory conclusion so remember to:

- Summarise the other party's views.
- Provide context by referring to the bigger picture.
- Inviting agreement.

TALKING THROUGH CONFLICT – EXERCISE

This exercise provides an opportunity for participants to consolidate their thoughts about conflict conversations.

1. Arrange participants into groups of between 4 and 6 and give them 10 minutes to prepare a presentation (max 5 minutes) on the effect on the organisation, team, project or customers (you choose to most appropriate subject on which to focus) of constructive disagreement compared to conflict.
2. Listen to, and discuss, each presentation (5-10 minutes). (Note – If the effects of conflict are serious, be prepared to keep notes and discuss them with more senior management.)
3. Ask the groups to list the main conflict-handling tips they have learned from the video(s) (10 minutes) for presentation to the whole group.
4. Listen to, and discuss, each presentation (5-10 minutes).
5. Ask each individual to specify three conflict resolution actions they will commit to. Give them a few minutes to think about this, then discuss a selection of actions (10 minutes).