Workplace Conflict

Workplace Conflict Resolution

10 ways to manage employee conflict and improve office communication, the work environment and team productivity.

Conflict happens in all corners of the workplace. But if issues aren't settled, bad things can happen: Good people quit, morale can plummet, and sometimes violence can erupt. But supervisors and managers don't need to become certified mediators to settle disputes. You just need to understand some basics about human behavior, practice the fine art of active listening and offer yourself as a neutral party who wants to find possible solutions.

In this special report, we've collected the best of Business Management Daily's advice on resolving conflict in the workplace. Whether you're a small business, Fortune 500 company, in-person, remote, or hybrid — we've got the insight you need.

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Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #1

The 5 Common Myths About Workplace Conflict

With proper workplace conflict resolution skills, a little bit of friction at work can be a positive source of innovation and creativity. Here are five myths about workplace conflict (plus tips on how to harness its power):

1. Conflict is always negative and should be avoided at work. Quite the contrary. When problems are hidden or masked, they aren't solved. They fester and grow into bigger problems. Conflict has to be acknowledged and addressed.

A big misconception about conflict is that it's a negative force.

The cause of the conflict is often creativity trying to happen, and savvy organizations look for ways to embrace and optimize conflict as a result.

Those closest to the work often have great ideas for better solutions. Help employees brainstorm these ideas, and then evaluate and prioritize them.

2. Difficult people are almost always the cause of conflict. While bad behavior is certainly a contributing root cause of conflict, failing to set realistic expectations is a big contributor. If people don't understand what the organization, their manager or their teammates expect, confusion and conflict can result.

Set expectations early, beginning with the job interview. Let people know what the job entails and what success in the role looks like.

3. The problem at the root of a conflict is usually obvious. Problem solving is central to managing conflict, but the problem can't be solved until it's identified. Getting to the source involves dialogue, conversations and some detective work.

There are a number of skills and techniques you have to employ: attending skills which put everyone on an even level; encouraging skills enabled others to

elaborate; clarifying skills to reduce ambiguity; and reflecting skills to restate in your own words what you've heard the other person say.

4. In conflict, there are always winners and losers. A position is a stand we take in a negotiation or conflict. It is what we demand from the other person. Interests are what we really want—our needs, desires and concerns. When positions become the focus of the conflict, the problem can get covered up along with any solution. Focusing on interests, rather than positions is more effective. Think about your interest and then separate your position from your interest.

Also, consider the other person's perspective. Stand in their shoes and contemplate what they really want.

5. It's a manager's responsibility to fix problems on their team. Unless a problem involves behavior or performance that needs to be addressed, a manager doesn't necessarily own it—the employees do. When managers intervene and exert authority, employees miss the opportunity to develop their own conflict management skills. Employees need the freedom and authority to solve problems that relate to their work

A guiding principle—in fact, a golden rule—of workplace conflict resolution is that the problem should be solved by the individuals who own it.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #2

Negotiating Workplace Conflict: 9 Tips for Managers

Conflict happens in all corners of the workplace. But if issues aren't settled, bad things can happen: Good people quit, morale can plummet, and sometimes violence can erupt.

But supervisors and managers don't need to become certified mediators to settle disputes. You just need to understand some basics about human behavior,

practice the fine art of active listening and offer yourself as a neutral party who wants to find possible solutions.

Here are nine insights and tricks of the trade, according to Jeffrey Krivis' book Improvisational Negotiation:

1. Let people tell their story. When people are deeply upset about something, they need to get their story out. This is a basic principle of mediation and one that's important to remember.

Yes, allowing people to speak their minds can increase the level of conflict with which you must deal. That's OK. You have to get through the conflict phase to find the solution.

Sometimes, feeling that he or she is finally "been heard" can dramatically change an angry person's outlook. Plus, as the employee tells the story, new information may come to light that allows a solution to emerge naturally.

2. Bring a reality check to the table. Often in a conflict, the parties are so focused on minutiae that they lose sight of the big picture and its implications. As the mediator, you need to bring people back to reality by wrenching their attention away from the grain of sand and having them focus on the whole beach. Doing so may help resolution arrive at a startling speed.

3. Identify the true impediment. In every conflict, ask yourself: What is the true motivating factor here? What is really keeping this person from agreeing to a solution?

When you can identify the impediment, then you can predict how the person will respond to certain ideas, and you can shape negotiations accordingly.

4. Learn to "read minds." Mind-reading is not magic. It is a combination of observation and intuition, which is born of experience.

You can learn a lot about how the parties see a dispute by paying attention to their body language and listening closely not only to their words but also to the emotional tone behind their words.

For instance, if an employee insists that they're 'okay,' but have tight lips and closed body language (arms folded, refusing eye contact, etc.), they're likely still annoyed – meaning the conflict resolution process isn't over yet. Perfecting your nonverbal communication skills is one of the best things you can do as a mediator.

5. Think creatively about ways people can cooperate rather than clash. In every negotiation, there's a 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.

6. Take the spotlight off someone who's refusing to budge. Isolation tends to create movement. When you mediate a multiparty conflict, you'll often discover that one person insists on taking a hard-line approach, refusing to compromise and shooting down every solution presented.

Suggestion: Take the attention off the "last man (or woman) standing" and begin settling around that person. You'll find that the holdout starts to anxiously call and send emails, trying to get things going again. When his or her perceived power is neutralized, the balky negotiator quickly sees the value of compromise.

7. "Edit the script" to help people see their situation in a different light. People tend to get stuck in their positions because they're telling what happened from a narrow viewpoint and in a negative, hopeless tone. They can't see the situation any other way unless you help them do so.

As the mediator, you can take a larger view that doesn't look at one party or the other "winning" but at both involved parties working toward a mutual goal. One

way to do that is to edit their script. Retell their story about the dispute in a positive, forward-looking construction.

In that way, you literally give them the words to see their options in a new light.

8. Avoid the "winner's curse" by carefully pacing negotiations. Believe it or not, 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. One or both parties may be left feeling that if things had moved more slowly, they might have cut a better deal.

Don't rush the dance or the negotiation will fail.

Even when you know you can wrap up things quickly, it's to everyone's advantage to keep the negotiation proceeding for a reasonable amount of time before the inevitable settlement.

9. Realize that every conflict can't be solved. What if you've tried to help two warring factions find a fair solution, but you just can't reach that elusive goal? That can happen— and often does. Not every negotiation will have a win/win outcome. Not everyone can live together in harmony, and sometimes two differing opinions can't find any common ground. There are times when you just have to accept that both parties will leave the table equally unhappy. Isolate the participants if possible, and just move on.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #3

Team Conflict Resolution: Knowing When to Referee

Suddenly the air is charged as you hear two employees enter a heated argument, something which has become a common occurrence. Today, one is accusing the

other of fouling up the production schedule; yesterday, it was because a customer's order went out a day late.

Enough is enough. The constant bickering disturbs other workers and upsets the department's workflow.

Disputes between employees are common and inevitable. The difficult decision is when to step in, says Joseph F. Byrnes, professor of management at Bentley College's Graduate School in Waltham, Mass. "Give the warring parties a chance to resolve it on their own," he says. "The time to take action is when things get out of hand, and the problems are affecting their work or disrupting other people's work."

"Find out if the conflict is work-related and has a structural root, or whether it's interpersonal and has no relationship to the job," Byrnes advises. An interpersonal conflict can happen on or off the job, whereas structural ones are inevitable in many organizations.

Advice: An easy way to evaluate the conflict, Byrnes says, is to ask yourself: "If you took these two people out of the situation and put two new people in, would you still have the conflict?" If the answer is yes, it's a structural conflict; if no, the cause is definitely interpersonal.

Structured Conflicts Can Turn Personal

Byrnes points out that structural conflicts can often turn interpersonal. After months— sometimes years—of battling, the two people concerned forget that there are actually systemic reasons for the conflict.

Managers can resolve both structural and interpersonal conflicts, Byrnes says, and often the techniques are not so different. To resolve a structural conflict:

- **Expand resources.** You can often alleviate a workflow problem by changing the way jobs are scheduled or by providing more resources.

- **Clarify job responsibilities.** Conflicts frequently arise when one department encroaches on another's domain. In engineering companies, for example, designers and engineers often have their differences. The designer creates a product on paper so that the engineer can create the actual product. Inevitably, problems arise when the two professionals work together to create the prototype. Each has his or her own ideas about how things should be done; hence, tempers often flare before solutions are found.

"The manager can step in and redefine who does what in the process and possibly act as a liaison between the two parties," Byrnes says.

Here are five techniques Byrnes suggests for dealing with either kind of conflict:

1. **Demand a truce.** Order the combatants to stop fighting and work out the problem themselves. If they're not successful, offer to step in and act as arbitrator. "They'll often welcome your stepping in because you're lifting the burden of solving the conflict from their shoulders," Byrnes says.
2. **Reduce interaction.** "Often, conflicts cool off when the two parties don't have to speak to each other throughout the day," he says. "If they're normally exchanging information all day long, suggest they meet less frequently, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. If they're constantly exchanging written information, for example, ask them to convey it through a neutral third party."
3. **Mediate.** Meet with the parties together. (If the issue is explosive, it might be better to meet with each one alone to gather facts.) Find out what the problem is, hash it out and work together to find a conflict resolution strategy that everyone can agree on. Talking it out can relieve pressure and often defuse the situation.
4. **Keep emotions in check.** Interpersonal conflicts are not that straightforward, Byrnes cautions, because they're usually based on irrational differences. One worker, for example, may dislike a colleague because he thinks, feels or acts a certain way. "No matter what the reason behind the disagreement, make it clear that you don't have to like a person

to work with him. As difficult as they may find it, they must learn to keep their emotions and feelings out of the workplace," Byrnes says.

5. **Create common goals.** "Often, combatants—whether the cause is structural or interpersonal—fail to see the big picture," he says. "They concentrate on their particular jobs, which usually represent only one process or part of the company's goals. By reiterating the company's goals and demonstrating how both employees are vital to the company's success, you might temporarily squelch their anger and create harmony—or at least coexistence." Then everyone will be able to function effectively on the job.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #4

You May Be a Bully and Not Even Know It

We all know what a big bully does: They yell, threaten, humiliate, manipulate, and frighten others. They're the king of the workplace jungle, and they need to constantly remind their employee and co-workers of that fact. Or do they really need to remind themselves?

The bully is at the red-orange end of the bullying spectrum and there's no going back. Their ego is fed at his employees' expense, but they know that and they enjoy it.

But there are subtle ways a boss can bully his workers that are not so apparent to them or even their superiors. But the workers feel it. Those would be the little idiosyncrasies or habits that the bully picked up on their way to bossdom that begin to alienate their staff and chip away at morale and employee engagement.

Four things that make you monster lite, but nonetheless repulsive:

1. **Your sarcasm has a nip to it.** You think you're funny and witty with clever one-liners that distinguish you from your workers. After all, we all need a good laugh now and then. But the recipient of a sarcastic crack thinks

you're treating him or her like an imbecile. Sarcasm has no place in the workplace, especially from a boss who holds sway over others' livelihoods.

2. **You're tougher on submissive employees.** "It's human nature: You're less likely to push, prod or pressure someone who has a bit of a backbone. So in order to flex your supervisory muscle, you're a little more demanding on the meek. It's easier to bark an order when you know you won't get any resistance. This act of who to pick on, who to leave alone doesn't need to be overt to be sensed by employees. They will catch on and see you as a coward—the cornerstone of a bully.

3. **You have all the answers.** The matriculation into management doesn't automatically give you unquestioning knowledge and foresight. In fact, there's more you need to learn, namely humility. It's an insecure boss—or a narcissistic one—who won't admit that they're stumped, that they don't have all the answers their employees seek. There's no quicker way to turn off your employees than by shooting down their ideas and suggestions because you know it all. The results are that employees will clam up in front of you, but will open up behind your back, criticizing your pompous ways.

4. **You develop a "you're an idiot" chuckle.** There's a certain forced laugh some bosses use before spewing their wisdom or points of view. For the boss, it may be just a habit, but the employee hears a dismissive, belittling chuckle that tells them that what you say after that should not be challenged.

Ditch these quirks fast if you recognize any in yourself. Employees don't deserve a bully, even a mild one. Not only that, but harassing conduct at work will land you in hot water with the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) if an employee files a hostile work environment claim.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #5

Don't Be Swayed by Office Politics

Let's assume that operating procedures are about to be changed to meet a new production schedule. Senior members of your staff favor one solution; the younger ones defend an alternate way. Either one could work.

Each faction is jockeying for power, each wants your support, and you are caught in the middle of office politics. How do you handle the situation?

As the manager, your approach should be to resolve the situation without offending or alienating either group. "Uppermost is not being seduced by the politics of one group over another," clinical psychologist William Knaus says.

When politics get in the way, it's time to step in cautiously. "You don't want your boss to think that your division is riddled with divisive disputes," Knaus says. "Your credibility is on the line if you can't right the situation."

Easing tensions between warring factions isn't easy.

"A bad move on the manager's part could create irreparable barriers, decrease productivity, as well as dampen morale," Knaus says. "The situation must be carefully managed so that you're not taking sides."

Your goal is to keep everyone focused on solving a problem and not be sidetracked by personal or political issues. Sensitive handling involves:

- **Recognizing different factions.** Managers must recognize and respect group differences so they remain objective and aren't sidetracked by petty conflicts.

  "It's only natural that there will be differences of opinion among people

with contrasting temperaments, abilities, responsibilities and work styles," Knaus says. "But you can't let these differences be a disruptive force."

- **Being sensitive to people's needs.** "It's also important to understand that different people are motivated by different things," such as money, recognition or power, Knaus explains. Once you recognize those needs, you'll be better equipped to respond to different factions.
- **Encouraging the factions to discuss their differences.** Set a time limit so disagreements can be resolved quickly. "The manager's job is not to prove anyone right or wrong. The objective is to establish a common ground between factions or seek an alternative that best meets the needs of the organization and both groups," Knaus says

Advice: If an issue is unusually sensitive or complicated, Knaus suggests turning it over to an informed, impartial third party to mediate. This can be an expedient solution that will leave you in the clear and ensure objectivity.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #6

6 Steps for Managing 'Difficult' Employees

Working alongside difficult people can be hard enough. But managing someone with whom you have a personality clash can cause major tension.

Experienced managers know how to separate emotions from the work at hand when dealing with employees. Rather than dwelling on an employee's negative personality traits, smart managers focus on tasks, projects and results. They don't allow their personal feelings to interfere, and they treat everyone the same way.

But in too many cases, managers simply turn away from their least favorite employees. Rather than interacting with them, they avoid them. What's worse, managers may just write off the problem employees and do the employees' jobs themselves.

Turning your back on difficult employees isn't just a management mistake—it can also create legal trouble. That's because employees who frequently bump heads with management are also the ones most likely to file lawsuits when they feel they're being treated unfairly.

That's why, when confronted with employees who don't do what's asked, it's best to devise a strategy for making the best of a potentially explosive situation. Although it may be hard to transform a difficult employee into a warm, friendly ally, you can take the following steps to handle conflict and make it easier for the employee to comply:

1. Confront problems head-on. If you don't like an employee, that person probably feels the same way about you. By clearing the air and calmly acknowledging any ill will, you can help the employee focus on getting the job done.

To level with the person, use phrases such as this: "When I ask you to do something, I need to rely on you. I realize we're very different people, but we can't let that stop us from doing our jobs."

2. Seek confirmation. When giving instructions, don't assume you're making yourself clear. Ask the employee to explain what you just said and what you expect of him or her.

3. Rehearse. Making simple requests is painless. But if you must explain something more complicated, don't wing it. You may waste time backtracking or jumbling words.

As you rehearse, use the fewest words possible to describe your goal. Boil down the expected outcome to its essential.

Once you find a concise way to summarize the outcome you want, write it down and memorize the key phrase that captures the main point.

4. Speak and write. To ensure the employee understands you, assign tasks both orally and in print. Get in the habit of talking with that person and telling him or her what you need. Let the employee ask questions and offer suggestions. Then, follow up soon after the discussion with an email or memo that summarizes what's expected, along with the timetable for the project.

5. Stick to behavior. When managing someone with an attitude problem, don't let the person's personality interfere with the job at hand. Focus on describing the work that you need done.

Avoid lacing your comments with any quips or cynical asides about the person's spotty track record on complying with your past requests. What you may view as a harmless jab ("Maybe you'll hit the deadline this time") may make the employee even more jaded and resistant to help.

6. Talk on the employee's turf. If you have a personality conflict with a certain employee, the last thing you should do is make him or her feel "bossed around" when you assign a task.

A practical way to encourage such employees to comply is to meet in their offices, not yours. Calling employees into your office to assign a task could instantly put them on the defensive.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #7

Read the Clues When Confronting a Worker

Cornering an employee to address performance issues is an unpleasant but necessary part of your job. It is, in essence, a closed-door moment where you lay out the person's shortcomings, give him or her a chance to explain and then agree to a course of action.

Many times team members will try to fake their way through it because, well, they feel their jobs are on the line.

But in addition to listening to their words, pay close attention to their body language. Those clues are valuable. Here are some ways employees react when in confrontational situations, and how you can respond.

Silence. This worker is plugged into what you're saying, so don't mistake him for a dismissive stoic. There's a good chance he's afraid to say anything that might provoke some discipline. Your response: Carefully word your questions and comments to loosen him up. Once you get him to talk, assure him that you're there to help, not punish. 3

Tears. You're dealing with a fragile worker who was likely taken by surprise that they weren't up to snuff. Your response: Be sympathetic, but don't join the pity party. Back off a bit until they compose themselves. Tell them it's not the end of the world (and certainly not their job), and the two of you are meeting to correct things.

Laughter. Don't assume he thinks the whole thing is a joke. Often, people let out a nervous giggle as a defense mechanism; he's scared and concerned. Your response: Never laugh with him. Remain serious and speak firmly, but don't overreact to his chuckles. He will stop once he senses your commitment to helping him recognize and correct his ways.

Anger. "Who? Me? You are so wrong." She is ready to jump out of her seat to defend herself; to let you know the whole meeting is unwarranted and you're off the mark. She doesn't feel she's responsible for the problem you've presented. Your response: Keep your cool, and she'll tone it down once you firmly explain in detail the problems she's caused. Focus on facts. With her, you can't be vague.

Apologies. His eyes are cast down, and he lifts them only to keep saying "I'm sorry." He appears humble and submissive and is probably hoping that his apologies will get him off the hook. Your response: Be wary of the sincerity. But as

long as he's agreeing to the problem, focus on the solution and get a commitment from him to cooperate.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #8

Did They Just Say, 'That's Not My Job?'

It's the response that no boss likes to hear after asking (or telling) an employee to step up and do something that he or she doesn't normally do.

"That's not my job."

It's the ultimate punch in the manager's gut because it's taken as a direct affront to the boss's authority. You've been challenged. Undermined. Dissed. Ouch!

You: Jim, can you file those boxes of folders? Jean's been out for two days and we need to get those back into place.

Jim: That's not my job.

You: (speechless).

Before you unload on Jim about your unflinching role as the delegator-in-chief whose decisions, orders and do-as-I-say whims should not be questioned, think of why Jim or any other employee would spew that line in the first place.

Here are three reasons why Jim (or others like him) stood his shaky ground and drew a line in the office carpet:

1. You didn't make it abundantly clear when you reviewed his job description with him that his duties can and will include anything that you need him to do for the benefit of the team. Repeat: for the benefit of the team. This should be done early in the interview stage and it should also be part of his annual review. It wouldn't hurt to drop reminders at staff meetings or during other one-on-one chats.

2. You tend to pick on Jim when you're looking for someone to fill in for an absentee or to pick up the workplace slack, perhaps just because you see him as an efficient, jack-of-all-tasks guy. Jim feels the sting of unfairness when he sees that you never cornered Jean to perform extra tasks. Somehow, she and a few others are exempt.

Take extra care to spread this out. Staff will quickly sense the inequity and label you as (a) uncaring; (b) out of touch; or (c) manipulative. Employees like Jim will call you on it.

3. If you're not guilty of No. 1 or No. 2, then you don't need Jim on the payroll. He's just not a good employee. He's insubordinate and a toxic component of your team. Such an attitude, if left unchecked, will suck the morale right out of your workplace.

It's also important that when you play shuffle-the-tasks with your workers that you reward them. Not in pay raises or bonuses. But show your appreciation. Give them fun assignments now and then. Take them to lunch. Let them cut out early.

"That's not my job" is a symptom of a deeper problem that you need to fix.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #9

Is It Them, Or Is It Me? The Problem Coworker Quiz

This one's real simple to score—just circle every question to which you answer "False." Circle it again … and then again … and then one more time. And then take a moment to think…

1. I know for a fact that my co-worker behaves in a way I know I never have or ever would.
2. I know enough about my co-worker's home and personal life to be sure that nothing can explain the reason for their behavior.

3. I'm sure my co-worker is the exact same aggravating person outside of the office as inside.
4. I can't think of anything to talk about with my co-worker that we would have fun discussing.
5. The time I spend being irritated and complaining about my co-worker is worth it.
6. Just letting go of how I feel about my co-worker is not an option.
7. Other people feel more hostile toward my co-worker than I do—I'm not the #1 complainer.
8. I am confident that no one I work with has any complaints about me personally.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Tip #10

Take a Deep Breath, Then Discipline Right

"I'm not afraid of getting sued—that's the cost of doing business. I just want to make sure I get sued on my terms."

These are the words of speaker, author and HR executive Paul Falcone in discussing the importance of making your disciplinary records as thorough and true to the facts as you possibly can. And yes, your playbook needs a solid defensive scheme when it's time to issue that initial warning to an employee who has slipped.

However, Falcone believes there's also a human side to corrective actions that should not be overlooked. This is a chance for a healthy reset—one that can reflect well on the people in charge. When a chain of positive reviews is broken by a disciplinary action, the kind of employee you want to work for you will awaken to a good faith effort to correct his or her performance. If that awakening doesn't happen, then you've done all you can do, and you can be certain it's time for a necessary change.

Falcone offers some golden rules of thumb for preparing and carrying through with disciplinary actions:

1. Seldom will disciplinary transgressions be identical, so make sure you've created a realistic system that takes into account the many gray areas of human behavior. The same transgression committed by two different people requires different handling depending on many factors. Be careful of blanket policies that sound strong on paper but collapse when they meet the actual range of personalities and problems in the workplace.

Your litmus test is this: How would you respond to this particular issue if your top-performing employee made the same error?

2. For progressive discipline to actually progress, there must be a link or nexus between events in order to move to a next stage. Otherwise, you'll end up with a series of first warnings rather than a progression of first, second and/or final written warnings. Falcone has seen companies develop vast bullet-pointed lists of unrelated infractions and penalties, when what they should be doing is making sure they've set down a short sequence of precise disciplinary steps, each containing some added element to impress upon the employee a growing sense of urgency.

3. HR should always be present for those tense meetings for two reasons: first, to act as a witness, and second, to ensure the employee is treated with dignity and respect. A coolly logical human resources presence is your best insurance that both parties will approach this situation as a mature deal: If they accomplish certain things, you will continue the working relationship. Otherwise, you agree to professionally walk away with no hard feelings. You never want this thought to flit even briefly through someone's mind: "I can't believe they treated me this way."

4. It must be your goal to shift the responsibility for improvement away from the company and toward its employees. Don't make promises of training, counseling or corrective actions that you can't keep, and don't go too far out on a limb to

suggest the company will go to extraordinary lengths to fix a worker's shortcomings.

Meet the employee halfway in the process, and make your company part of the solution. What courts want to sense, if it ever comes to that, is that you put forth your best effort for someone, but it just didn't work out because the employee didn't meet his or her end of a fair bargain.

Understand The Difference Between True Conflicts And Different Communication Styles

Remember, not every conflict is a battle to be fought. With an "equal opportunity" workplace, it is easy to forget that certain differences in gender, race, culture, national origin, and genetics—can still play underlying roles in office communications and perceived conflicts.

In her book, You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, Georgetown University professor of linguistics, Deborah Tannen notes, "To most women, conflict is a threat to connection…disputes are preferably settled without direct confrontation. But to many men, conflict is the necessary means by which status is negotiated, so it is to be accepted and may even be sought, embraced and enjoyed." Thus, it is easy to see how certain preferred male/female conversational styles can unintentionally offend the opposite gender. While it may seem at first that conflict is the opposite of rapport and affiliation; it is more complicated than that. Conflict may be valued as a way of creating involvement…and involvement can lead to a kind of bonding and ultimately benefit the entire team. For example, Tannen points out that, in general, many women like to talk in an inclusive manner that is meant to "build community." While many men prefer to speak in a "let's get to the point" manner to quickly address the problem at hand. Depending on the situation or task, one style can frustrate another, though parties using both styles share the same solution-minded goals.

Likewise, different cultural and geographical backgrounds can lead to miscommunication. Tannen advises that simply being aware of different communication styles—with neither being "right" or "wrong"—can help everyone accept those differences with good will.

Tannen also advises managers to be on the lookout for any "metamessages" workers are sending. For example, if a proposed solution involves asking one co-worker to help another, this is probably framed as a positive. But to some, it can unintentionally send the negative metamessage, "She's more competent than you," or "He's not working fast enough."

Learning about style differences won't make conflicts go away. But, Tannen concludes, "Having others understand why we talk and act as we do can protect us from the pain of their puzzlement and criticism." Working together towards better understanding can banish mutual mystification and blame.