



# Defusing the office conflict time bomb

Disputes arise in any workplace, but how you deal with them makes all the difference

BY BETSY BURKE PARKER

Workplace conflict is a leading cause of employee stress.

Simple steps taken to resolve disagreements immediately prevent most issues from escalating, experts say.

Conflict can largely be prevented when managers act swiftly to resolve issues between co-workers, or between management and employees.

And when conflict cannot be handled internally, companies can turn to the pros.

The natural human inclination is to avoid conflict with others, says Warenton-based mediation expert Phil Mulford. And there's particular

pressure to avoid workplace conflict.

"Avoidance isn't a long-range plan," he says. If you don't talk it out, you act it out. And acting out can cost a company, big-time."

According to Mulford, cost of replacing one employee can be more than his yearly salary.

Though mediation fees can be steep — from a few hundred dollars to several thousand — the price of professional help is dwarfed when you consider the costs associated with:

- Lost productivity due to inter-office conflicts,
- Firing the troublemaker and

hiring a new employee,

- Training the new employee.

"It sounds expensive until you consider the alternative," Mulford says.

Just like an empathetic human resources manager, a mediator gives voice to all parties embroiled in office conflict, Mulford says.

"Everybody wants to be heard," he says. "Not continuing to argue past each other, but telling your side, your thought process, and for the other person to hear it, actually understand what you're saying and what you're meaning."

"Conflict is almost always simple mis-communication."



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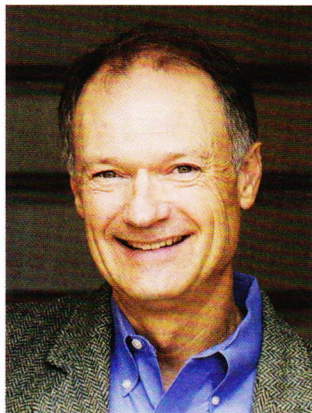
Mulford works with business owners, government employees and corporate workers at all levels.

"There's communication breakdown in every size of office," he says. "People are so much happier when you stop pointing fingers and you start talking."

To get a handle on the situation, Mulford seats everyone at a round table. Each person gets to tell their side of the story without interruption.

Then Mulford offers his thoughts on the conflict, and everyone has a chance to comment on what's been said.

"Just because I've said it doesn't mean you've understood it," Mulford says. "It's the back-and-forth communication, feedback with a third party — me — helping make sure everybody has a chance to be heard, that turns as-



"Avoidance isn't a long-range plan."

— PHIL MULFORD

sumption into understanding."

### Mediation effective?

Mediation is a powerful tool for resolving serious workplace conflict. Still, mediators caution, the practice isn't magic and requires

deep engagement by all associated parties and competent guidance by an experienced mediator.

"I think a lot of workplace conflict is due to generational divides," said Joseph Whited, a civilian defense department manager. "I have experienced it firsthand managing employees. Millennial meets the baby boomer — next thing you know, they hate each other."

"The worst thing a manager can do is to presume they'll work it out themselves," he says. "You shouldn't intervene immediately but when it becomes evident it's not working, you have to take action"

One time as Whited was preparing for vacation, he tapped a more senior employee to be in charge of the other staff members in his absence.

## When to call for help

Most of the time, settling workplace disputes on your own is the simplest way to handle those situations.

However, you may need an outside mediator, arbitrator or attorney to sort things out.

*HR Magazine* says to seek expert advice when:

- Dealing with potential legal issues, such as claims of discrimination or harassment.
- The HR department lacks resources or training in conflict resolution.
- You're experiencing a pattern of recurring issues.
- Handling flare-ups that become abusive or resemble bullying.
- A manager needs retraining that can't be handled in house.
- The environment has become so toxic that it's time to get everyone offsite so the office doesn't continue to trigger negative responses.

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## 10 STEPS TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS IN THE WORKPLACE

1. Schedule a meeting to address the problem, preferably at a neutral place.
2. Set ground rules. Ask all parties to treat each other with respect and to make an effort to listen and understand others' views.
3. Ask each participant to describe the conflict, including desired changes. Direct participants to use "I" statements, not "you" statements. They should focus on specific behaviors and problems rather than people.
4. Ask participants to restate what others have said.
5. Summarize the conflict based on what you have heard and obtain agreement from participants.
6. Brainstorm solutions. Discuss all of the options in a positive manner. Rule out any options that participants agree are unworkable.
7. Summarize all possible options for a solution.
8. Assign further analysis of each option to individual participants.
9. Make sure all parties agree on the next steps.
10. Close the meeting by asking participants to shake hands, apologize and thank each other for working to resolve the conflict.

Source: Society for Human Resource Management

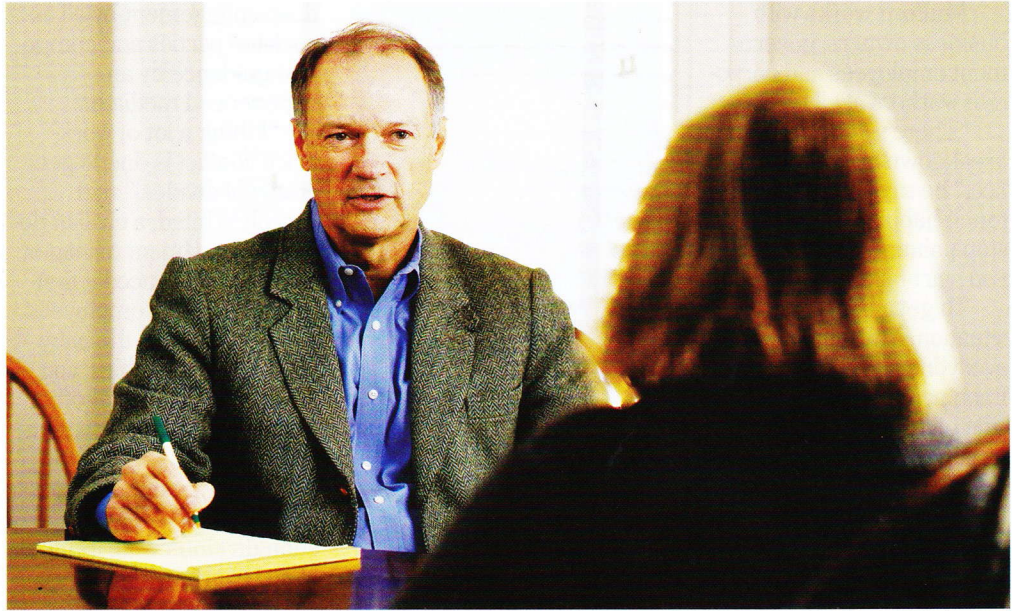


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According to mediator Phil Mulford, most workplace conflicts are the result of miscommunication. Getting the warring parties to sit down together and giving each a chance to be heard goes a long way toward defusing the tension.

That choice created a hostile work environment while the boss was out, with some actions by the temporary manager bordering on harassment over the hours of work and personal issues.

"I couldn't let it [continue] when I got back, so we met to talk it out," he says.

In the end, the conflict resolved as a bit of a Cold War stalemate, but the team was able to continue to function thanks to the intervention.

"If left to fester I am certain we would have all ended up talking with lawyers," Whited says.

### Too little, too late

Still, sometimes by the time a clash is called to management's attention, it's too late,

Mulford says. A valued employee may have already decided to quit, or a project has soured because of the inability to communicate.

"Ignoring conflict can be costly, with every unaddressed issue costing a company valuable productivity and time spent gossiping and complaining," Mulford says. "It's an enormous drain on an organization."

By nurturing the team atmosphere, says Veteran Administration human resources officer Jan Perry, you avoid classic dysfunction such as avoidance of accountability and absence of trust.

"Most conflict results from lack of information, poor information, no information or misinformation," she says. "Fix that, you fix the problem."

### When to hire a conflict resolution consultant

*In most situations, unproductive friction in the workplace can be resolved using conflict resolution.*

Here are some reasons to call in the pros:

- Someone is uncooperative, denies there's a problem or asserts they're a victim.
- Behavior and language are intolerable.

- Owners, partners, key executives or managers are directly involved.
- Destructive conflict is becoming the company norm.
- The conflicts are repetitive, involving the same people or issues — and they're not getting better.
- The conflict spreads, involving others, affecting morale and workplace atmosphere.





"The question is not how to avoid conflict but how to fix it."

— LAWRIE PARKER

With regard to information sharing, Lawrie Parker does more than talk about peace. She works for it through her Piedmont Dispute Resolution Center, open in Warrenton since 1990.

Parker says workplaces by definition create ideal conditions for turmoil. The very things that allow for the creative process also feed disagreements.

"You have a group of people tossed together, different personalities, different styles of work ethic, different backgrounds. It's a recipe for conflict.

"Aggravation on the job is an inevitable fact of life," she says. "You figure out what's worth going to battle for."

When managers take what Parker calls the "ostrich approach" — conflict avoidance — they risk a situation festering and, eventually, worsening.

"Lower productivity and morale can infect an organization," she says. "The question is not how to avoid conflict but how to fix it."

### Good vs. bad conflict

Parker says there's good conflict and there's bad conflict. "Many people assume it's a wholly bad thing.

"Good people, great employees,

## Consider the situation and the people involved when seeking a resolution to workplace conflict

Methods of dealing with workplace conflicts vary widely and require different strategy for each individual situation and personality.

According to FedEx pilot Deb Dodge, workplace not only aggravates employees, but in some businesses, like the airline industry, can create downright dangerous situations.

Diffusing potential conflicts requires managers to be approachable, setting the tone and soliciting input from employees.

"Our procedure is a 'mediated debrief,' to handle complaints," she says.

Dodge remembers a junior pilot — very skillful and talented in the cockpit — spending an inordinate amount of time texting while "behind the wheel."

No one wanted to confront the young pilot, so the case ended up in the company's "resource management procedure."

"It was easily resolved," she says, without hurt feelings or anger at a "tattle-tale."

### 'Resentful and petulent'

College professor Louisa Woodville previously worked for a big company in Chantilly that marketed credit reports.

One member of her design team was "incredible."

"Anything we discussed she embraced and gave 110 percent. I loved her," Woodville says.

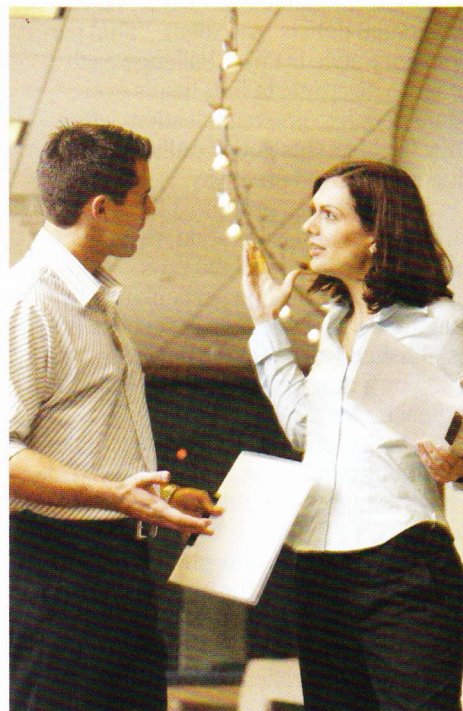
Another member of the team was often "resentful and petulant." When asked for help on a project, she would "stare at me as though willing the ground to open up and devour me," she says.

Woodville talked to a manager about how to handle the woman's not-so-veiled hostility. The manager suggested giving her her own assignment to completely control from start to finish, rather than just a piece of another project.

"Her whole attitude changed," Woodville says. "She started smiling and, sure enough, resentment waned as pride and cooperation took its place."

### Men vs. women

Caitlyn Eubanks, a NASA propulsion



systems engineering team manager, works mostly with men, who she says approach problems differently than women.

"I end up having to think like a man, and to a certain extent act like a man, in my HR strategy," Eubanks says. "Men want to confront the problem, even if it's overreaction."

Women, on the other hand, can be "a little passive" about dealing with conflict.

"They'd rather whisper about it around the copier rather than just confront someone," she says.

Effective managers, according to Eubanks, need to look at the individual personalities involved, otherwise they can make a bad situation even worse.

"You want each person to know they've been heard, whether they've been arguing and fighting, or whether they've been gossiping and refusing to talk to the other person," Eubanks says.

"As a manager, I sort of need a carrot and a stick when I'm handling conflict," she says. "The reward is that everyone gets heard."



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can definitely see things different ways. It just means you're two people, with differing experience, not that someone is 'wrong' and someone is 'right.'"

Good conflict, Parker says, is direct passionate debate over ideas. "That participatory style is key. Challenge each other to disagree, to butt heads even. Managers become team leaders when they facilitate this good conflict. It produces energized creativity."

But when disagreement leads to strife, anger and frustration, managers need to step in, or call the pros.

Parker recalls one particularly challenging conflict she helped resolve. An established worker at the company was irked by a new hire. They were sabotaging each other.

"One person was more direct in her communication style, the other indirect. Plus they agreed about nothing," Parker says.

"There was tension, and the HR manager was afraid the new hire was going to drive the older employee right out of the office," she says.

Parker was called in to untangle the

"Most conflict results from lack of information, poor information, no information or misinformation."

— JAN PERRY, VETERANS  
ADMINISTRATION HUMAN  
RESOURCES OFFICER

mess. She went in with a plan to determine what would work in resolving the issues between the two staffers.

"I spoke to each of them on the phone, then met with both in person, in the same room at the same time," Parker says.

She wanted to determine how each of them saw the other, not to find fault. "The trick is to let steam out of the pressure cooker," Parker says.

"Once both of them got a chance to speak honestly to each other, in a safe, closed environment, we were able to fine-tune a short-term goal they both could keep," she says.

The goals started simply: such as

saying "good morning" to each other every day.

Next, they worked to refine long-term goals of the customized, signed mediation agreement Parker maps out for each case.

"We don't force solutions on people," Parker says. "We facilitate a productive conversation. The compliance rate is far higher when you're making your own plan, not having it decreed by management or court order or something."

When there are no fears they'll be fired, and when they trust they'll be "heard," Parker says, employees tend to open up, and a solution becomes obvious, and easy.

### Handle it internally

"Mediated contracts are legally binding," says mediator Mulford, who practiced as an attorney nearly a decade before opening Mulford Mediation.

"People want to abide by them because they were the ones to determine [the content], not some judge's decree or manager's whim. It's the best way to manage conflict."

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