



Conflict Resolution

Conflict is inevitable—whether it be with employees or customers. Here are some tips to help manage the problem successfully.

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Whether your business is big or small, run as a family operation or staffed like a multinational corporation, chances are conflict will arise at some point between employees. With human nature being what it is, it's almost inevitable: someone, somewhere, will take exception to something in the workplace, and what was once the peaceful harmony of a united team pulling together to accomplish a goal, is suddenly broken.

As a manager, your method of dealing with conflict in the workplace may be one of the most important tools you can apply to the overall success of your business. And, with people being people, the environment or specifics of a particular conflict may matter less than how it is acknowledged, addressed and ultimately resolved.

But even if many conflicts share common traits and can be resolved using some of the same techniques, small-business owners and managers may find that conflict resolution can present its own unique challenges.

"Conflict resolution is conflict resolution, whether the organization is big or small," says John Baldoni, a leadership and communications consultant and author of *How Great Leaders Get Great Results*. "The difference is that in a small, family business everyone knows everyone else's business and so it's hard to maintain distance and objectivity."

The key to understanding your role in successful conflict resolution is to recognize that not all conflict should be viewed in a negative light, and that your own performance in working toward a solution likely is to be watched closely by all sides.

"Focus on the positive side of each person's differences, and recognize that each person brings a different strength to the table," says management expert Lynda Ford, author of *Transform Your Workplace*, which focuses on how businesses can develop and retain employees. "Try to deal with the underlying reasons for conflict and use active listening skills. If you want your employees to be high performance, then as the business owner, you also need to be in a high performance mode."

Here are some techniques that can help managers and business owners address and resolve conflicts in the workplace:

- **Insist on objectivity throughout the process.** "Focus on performance, not personality," Baldoni says. "There's no such thing as a 'bad attitude'—it is poor behavior or bad actions that cause conflict."
- **Encourage participants to solve the problem themselves.** Don't allow the conflict to draw in other parties, particularly otherwise uninvolved owners or managers. When this is not possible, then senior leadership can step in and mediate.
- **Argue the business case.** Point out that the conflict is harming the business because it is hindering your ability to serve customers and is hurtful to the employee work environment.
- **Gain agreement on what must change.** For example, identify what employees must either start doing or stop doing and who should do what. "If possible, redesign the job to maximize group or individual effectiveness," Ford says. "Use sub-groups or joint job assignments to help reduce conflict, especially when working in a team."
- **Hold people accountable.** Create a timetable by when change should be accomplished.