Workplace Conflict

There are two kinds of conflicts: **emotional /affective** and **substantive**.

Emotional/ Affective conflict involves emotions such as fear or anger and is based on feelings, perceptions, and attitudes, instead of logic. You dislike the gum-chewing, opinionated person next to you; you distrust the mailroom clerk; and you avoid the executive assistant in the second office who has an annoying laugh and was rude to you twice. These are **personal biase**s that often change once you get to know someone better. You can't always help the way you feel about people, and you do not have to like everyone you meet.

Substantive conflict, on the other hand, involves thought and reason. If you have a substantive conflict with someone at work, it usually occurs because that person has something you do not have: a new copier, a bigger department budget, or the boss's attention. The conflicts here can be both constructive and destructive: they are constructive when they encourage competitiveness and destructive when they build resentment, jealousy, and stress.

Sources of substantive conflicts.

Role confusion
"I thought you were doing that." "I did that yesterday."
Elaine works in the advertising department. Her boss, Serge, is the head layout designer in the advertising department. Rochelle is the head of the advertising department. Rochelle asks Elaine to fix up a perfume ad. Elaine works all afternoon on the ad and then brings it to Serge. Serge says, "I assigned this to Ayesha yesterday. It's already in. Why were you wasting your time on this?" Elaine replied that Rochelle had asked her to do it. "Next time, check with me first," was Serge's reply.

Lack of resources
All companies have limited resources. Everyone is expected to share resources; when an individual or department does not share, that creates conflict. Conflict also occurs when shared resources are not returned or when one department gets resources that another department also wants. Again, the conflicts come from a sense of resentment or jealousy.

Dependence on others
Often, in a group, different people are assigned different tasks. If any one of the tasks does not get done, the entire project is affected. Dependence conflicts occur in groups when someone you depend on does not follow through or does poor work. Imagine their resentment when the slacker gets praised.

Different goals
Marketing wants to sell, sell, sell. They are ready to spend millions of dollars on an advertising campaign. The accounting department says they can't spend that much because the company cannot afford the advertising budget. Conflicts occur because the goals of the two departments are different. Often, these conflicts produce good, rational arguments from both sides, but the conflict can also lead to hurt feelings and hidden anger.

Organizational structures
Creative teams are beneficial to many companies. They are full of creative people working on wonderful new tasks. These teams are often given flexible work schedules, home-based operations, and other forms of special attention. Conflicts can arise here because other employees who see the way the teams are pampered feel resentment and jealousy.

Substantive Conflicts as Emotional Conflicts
Notice how many of the substantive conflicts can become emotional ones as well: ***Jealousy, anger, and resentment are all emotions that arise out of the substantive conflicts just described.***

Conflict Management Strategies

The following are eight commonly used strategies for dealing with conflict.
Rate from 1-5 how effective you think each of these strategies could be when used in the workplace
Explain your reasons.

For the good of the company
Most individuals are willing to put aside differences for the common good. Adversaries may work together if they understand that the overarching goal is more important than their individual differences. A manager can use this argument to focus employees with conflicting opinions or attitudes on one of the company's specific goals.

Buying more
If a lack of resources is a problem, managers could consider buying more resources or using different methods to allocate the ones that they already have. Managers can apportion some of their department budget to individual wish lists; it is amazing how much goodwill a new photocopier or access to specialized software can provide. Consult the staff to see where the resource conflicts come from. Group decision making could provide a deeper understanding of the problem and could result in many of the conflicting departments working out a way of sharing that is acceptable to all.

Changing personnel
Transferring the source of conflict to another department may solve the problem – or create another just like it in the new department. If there is an identifiable troublemaker with whom no one can get along, it makes good management sense to try to correct the offender's behaviour. The HR department could offer appraisal interviews that realistically outline the strengths and weaknesses of that individual. During the interview, the manager and employee develop a plan for personal growth. It is at this stage that the employee considers corrective counselling.

Changing the layout
Reconfiguring the office space so that employee A does not have to work near employee B may seem a bit excessive. However, separating workers who cannot get along with one another decreases the potential for conflict. Both employees should be informed about the purpose of this alteration and warned against continuing the conflict.

New organizational structures
Matrix organizations and task teams are structures that provide relief from traditional hierarchical arrangements. Traditional organizational structures trap employees in one specific relationship, which, if conflict occurs, can be difficult to manage and make productive. Matrix structures and teams open up new avenues of communication and opportunities to work with others.

Rewarding co-operative behaviour
If a company rewards teamwork and co-operation, it will discourage conflict that may arise through competitiveness. Those employees who work well with others get the greatest benefits.

Setting policy
Managers can set policies that outline how employees are expected to get along and outline procedures to deal with employees who cannot avoid conflict. Employees will realize that the organization regards co-operation as a serious goal and will avoid conflict as a result.

Training
Interpersonal skills training is offered in many forms: books, seminars, conferences, guest speakers, and workshops.
Companies can offer employees opportunities to attend these sessions, or organize staff retreats, lunches, or breakfast meetings that focus on interpersonal skills development. A successful program will provide employees with new ways of relating to each other that are less likely to create conflict, such as empowerment strategies, collaboration techniques, and active listening skills.

Conflict management styles
The five management styles used for conflict resolution, also known as the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), are the following:

Avoiding
For unimportant conflicts, a manager should do nothing. The problem will go away, or the people need to work it out on their own, as adults.

Accommodating
A manager can appeal to each of the parties to give in for the sake of harmony and the good of the company. If one party gives in, the conflict will disappear. Accommodation is most effective when the issue is clear and relatively unimportant, and there is a lot of time for discussion.

Competing
A manager can use power to force an alternative. One party will win, the other will lose, but the conflict has ended, and work continues.
Authoritative strategies work best when there is time pressure and the conflict is over important decisions. The fallout from authoritative decisions can be dealt with later, in a private conversation with the two parties.

Compromising
A compromise works on the principle that everybody can gain something by losing something.
The manager should have the two parties involved in the conflict suggest a compromise: a solution that is not perfect but that both can live with.
The employees feel somewhat empowered that they solved the problem, and they can get on with their work. Situations that require moderately important decisions and have some time pressures call for compromises.

Collaborating
If a manager has time, and the conflict is over an important issue, it is worth helping the parties to sit down together and work out the conflict so that both parties are happy with the solution.
The discussion of the issue, with other interested parties involved as well if possible, can result in a very creative and productive meeting.

Role Play Scenarios

Scenario 1:

In a four-person team working on a product launch, Taylor hasn't completed their section of the project, causing the rest of the team to miss the deadline. The other group members are frustrated, especially since Taylor is now making excuses and asking for more time.

Scenario 2

Kayla needs the colour printer to finalize a client presentation, but Luke has been using it for over an hour for non-urgent training materials. When Kayla asks if she can quickly print, Luke brushes her off, saying, "You'll have to wait like everyone else."

Scenario 3

Deena is an upbeat and chatty team member, while Marcus prefers a quiet, focused work environment. Deena often starts conversations during work hours, and Marcus finds it distracting and unprofessional. Their tensions are growing, and now they barely speak to one another.

Scenario 4

The Marketing team wants to launch a new social media campaign that requires extra funds. The Finance team insists the budget is already stretched and denies the request. Both teams are frustrated and feel the other side "doesn't get it."

Scenario 5

Two team members, Jasmine and Omar, were both told they were leading the same project. Jasmine received instructions directly from the department head, while Omar received a similar task from the team supervisor. Now both are working separately and arguing about who's really in charge.

Scenario 6

The Creative Team has just been given permission to work from home two days a week. Other employees in the company feel this is unfair and are becoming resentful, believing the Creative Team gets special treatment.