# Dealing with problems

## Overview

Conflict resolution is the process by which two or more parties reach a peaceful resolution to a dispute.

In the workplace, there can be a variety of types of conflict:

* Conflict may occur between co-workers, or between supervisors and subordinates, or between service providers and their clients or customers.
* Conflict can also occur between groups, such as management and the labour force, or between whole departments.

Remember though that some conflicts reflect real disagreements about how an organization should function and these can be used to improve and enhance how an organisation works.

The resolution of conflicts in the workplace typically involves some or all the following processes:

* Recognition by the parties involved that a problem exists.
* Agreement to address the issue and find some resolution.
* An effort to understand the perspective and concerns of the opposing individual or group.
* Identifying changes in attitude, behaviour, and approaches to work by both sides that will lessen negative feelings.
* Recognizing triggers to episodes of conflict.
* Interventions by third parties such as Human Resources representatives or higher-level managers to mediate.
* A willingness by one or both parties to compromise.
* Agreement on a plan to address differences.
* Monitoring the impact of any agreements for change.
* Disciplining or terminating employees who resist efforts to defuse conflicts.

## Image result for conflict resolutionConflict resolution process

The steps in effective conflict resolution include:

* Creating an optimal atmosphere
* Clarification of perceptions
* Focusing on the needs of the individual, as well as shared needs
* Using an approach that is positive
* Creating options
* Developing an action plan
* Making agreements that are mutually beneficial
* Parting on good terms

### Creating an optimal atmosphere

Conflict that arises at work should never be dealt with in the heat of the moment. If there are issues and conflicts that need to be resolved, it is important for there to be a specific time allocated where all parties involved will not be interrupted or distracted. Conflict must never be dealt with in front of customers and client bodies.

The discussion should be started in an open and positive way. If any of the parties involved are angry, the session should be postponed until they feel in control of their emotions. It can also be beneficial to relocate the discussion to a neutral place. The location may be a public location where all parties feel obliged to be polite and in control of their emotions. For example, the parties may agree to meet for coffee. Those involved in the conflict are less likely to unload their anger onto the other person. It is important that the location is in a place that the location can be kept private, but where all parties feel safe.

### Clarify perceptions

Take the time at the beginning of the session for everyone involved to state their views. Blaming statements must be avoided, such as, *“You make me so angry.”* Observations and feelings about the event should be stated, for example, *“I had asked for the Saturday night off as I have family visiting, I am upset because my request was not taken into consideration”*.

Abusive or inflammatory remarks must be avoided at all costs. For example, if someone says, *“You are rude and insensitive”*, the person listening will be more likely to tune out and they are more likely to become defensive and unwilling to listen for any longer. A more effective way to communicate would be by saying *“My feelings were hurt by your jokes about death as I have a family member who is terminally ill”*, the listener will be more likely to engage in further conversation.

When it is time to listen, always pay close attention to what the person is saying. Make use of paraphrasing, summarizing, and questions to identify what the other person is saying and feeling. For example, *“Are you saying that you were angry when I asked you to work on Saturday as you wanted the time off to spend with your family and you thought that I ignored your request?”*. Try to avoid taking comments personally and ask questions to engage what the actual problem is.

Pay attention to language, voice tonality, as well as non-verbal gestures. Remain calm and centred.

### Focus on the individual and shared needs

Determine what it is that each person wants and needs to resolve the situation. For example, in this scheduling conflict, the supervisor requires a cook for the Saturday night however is not willing to pay overtime. The supervisor would like to keep Bob, the cook, happy as he is a hardworking and motivated staff member. However, Bob would like time off to visit his mother but feels passionate about his job and would hate to jeopardize it. Bob and the supervisor would like to resolve the issue and maintain their working relationship. They share a concern about the restaurant running smooth. The identification of shared needs has meant that they are working towards a consensus, meaning that they are both seeking to reach a decision that will take the needs of both parties into account.

### Take a positive approach

When working towards a solution, all parties should adopt the attitude that there will be a solution to the problem. It is not a time to focus on the failures or to resolve issues from the past. Treat all agreements as though they are starting fresh. Always seek to forgive others from the past and continue to work towards the goals that have been set.

### Generate options

Brainstorming should be used to generate as many ideas as possible with no evaluation or criticism of them. Every idea should be treated as new material to help solve the issue.

### Develop stages to action

Sort through the ideas, determining those that will work. Set goals and generate an action plan. Determine short steps that are achievable and will help to achieve the overall goal.

### Make mutual benefit agreements

Although this may seem like bargaining, it begins from a different viewpoint. The aim is to ensure that all parties achieve what they need. Rather than reaching a compromise, all parties are aiming to establish a way that they can both win.

### Part on good terms

Once the conflict has been dealt with, or both parties have agreed to disagree, it is important to part on good terms. Always treat the other party with respect and dignity, taking time to thank the person for discussing the issue. For example, you may say, *“Although we did not agree on the issue, I have respect for your beliefs, and I appreciate you for explaining your point of view”*. This creates an environment to work together harmoniously. Furthermore, it means that the other person is more likely to have a positive approach to resolving future conflicts.

### Dealing with anger

Conflict cannot be resolved effectively if anger cannot be controlled. Strategies to cope with anger include:

* Calming down by taking a deep breath
* Explaining why you are angry (without becoming abusive)
* Postponing the discussion if needed
* Establishing and writing down key points and concerns prior to the discussion
* Relocating the discussion to a neutral location.

If the other person feels angry, it is important to acknowledge their feelings. For example, it may be beneficial to say*, “I can see that you were angry when I asked you to redo the booth plan for the exhibition coming up”*. By acknowledging the other person’s feelings does not mean that you are agreeing with them. It suggests that their feelings and what they have said has been acknowledged. If they are unable to remain calm, suggest postponing the conversation.

### When one party believes there is no conflict

There may be times where you feel upset or angry, however the other person is unable to see the problem. This may be frustrating; however, it can be beneficial to specifically define the issue by describing the problem and how it has affected you.

### When you feel nervous about confronting someone

It can be an unnerving experience to confront someone with an issue. There may have been previous issues or there may be a problem with a supervisor. A tool to deal with this could be roleplaying the situation with a friend or co-worker and asking them for feedback on how to manage the conflict more effectively. Properly define what you need to have the issue resolved. Ensure that the meeting with the person is in a neutral location.

### When the other party does not want to resolve the issue

It may appear as though the other party does not want to resolve the issue. Often, the most effective resolution to this is to directly approach the person and ask whether they want to resolve the issue or not. If they say yes, explain why it has come across that they do not want a resolution, and deal with these issues first. If the person does not want to resolve the issue, it is up to you to decide whether the issue needs to be escalated or whether it can be put aside.

For example, you may consider finding another job, however, you may also decide that the issues with this person in this job outweighs the issues associated with the conflict.

There may be people who do not want a solution because they are interested in having things their way. It may be possible to go beyond this by making the effort to identify what they need. Ask how their needs can be met by meeting your own.

When conflicts cannot be resolved, a mediator may be required to assist with dealing with the problem. While our organisation does not have formal mediation services, BRTC senior staff that may be able to assist with the resolution of the conflict.

### A complaint about your behaviour

If there has been a mistake made and it is agreed that the complaint made about you is fair, it is imperative to make an appropriate apology. The next step is to identify how to correct the problem in the future. Do not apologise repeatedly, rather decide on how you will rectify the issue. Express thanks for the person raising the issue.

If the complaint is unfair, make it clear that it is how you feel. Attempt to resolve the issue that has arisen. It may come down to ineffective communication. Try to close the matter in a way that ensures that you are both parting on good terms. Although the complainant may be wrong or misinformed, ensure that you do not argue about minor issues or make them look foolish. Find a way to give thanks, for example, *“Thank you for discussing this with me”*.

## Handling customer complaints

The handling of customer complaints is an application of conflict resolution skills. Unsatisfied customers can severely impact on our business and reputation. Tourism businesses are dependent on repeated business, as well as word-of-mouth advertising. If a customer is unsatisfied with a service or a meal in our cafe, there is the risk of losing potential business. Customers may also be lost because of hearing about another customer’s bad experience. Similarly, our client groups are susceptible to similar word of mouth comments.

With websites such as Trip Advisor, it has become increasingly easier for customers to post public feedback about their experiences.

Customers that have complained and whose complaints have been met satisfactory are more likely to return than those who have not complained. It is because most dissatisfied customers will simply walk away and not return. A complaint provides an opportunity to determine the mistakes that the business has made and correct them. It is in our organisation’s best interest to resolve customer complaints promptly and satisfactorily.

Complaints may be resolved whether it is our fault or not. Customers that make complaints want to be taken seriously and treated with respect. The customer may seek immediate action, compensation, or they may wish that the staff member is reprimanded. They may also want to resolve an issue, ensuring that it does not happen again.

Handling complaints involves being a problem solver and requires the following skills:

* Diffusing anger
* Acknowledging when to utilize problem solving
* Problem solving
* Knowing and respecting the boundaries of authority

### Diffusing anger

When dealing with a customer complaint, the complainant may react strongly and negatively. It is important to deal with the emotion and upset of the person making the complaint prior to resolving the problem. Until emotions have been calmed, the person will not hear or listen to logical suggestions and solutions.

If the customer becomes angry and makes a complaint, it can be easy to become emotional yourself. It is important to remain calm and controlled, keep eye contact and pay attention to posture, voice tone and facial expression.

Never take the complaint personally, take some deep breaths and calm yourself if required. Provide encouragement for the person to blow off steam, apologise and acknowledge their feelings. Ensure that the apologies are sincere and dignified. Do not apologise in a manner that will have the customer questioning your sincerity. Show empathy by nodding and encouraging them to finish what they have to say. Actively listen and reassure them that you want to help them resolve the issue.

### Solving the problem

When the person is in an emotional and mental position to objectively discuss the situation, the next step is to move to the problem-solving stage. Ask them what they would like to resolve the issue, offer solutions that are within your scope of authority. Agree on a solution. If you cannot reach a satisfactory solution, help in advancing the complaint to a supervisor or manager. If this solution is not immediately possible, collect the relevant information and relay it. Advise the customer that the relevant person in our organisation will get in contact with them regarding their concern and thank them for bringing the issue to your attention.

Ensure your staff clearly understand the complaint resolution procedures. Ensure that they are aware of how complaints must be handled. There are many tourism businesses that have a policy of “no questions asked”, therefore, if a customer returns a menu item, it is replaced free of charge, or they are eligible for a refund.

Respect differences in personal values and beliefs and their importance in the development of relationships.

Each person has their own set of values and beliefs that will drives their perception of the world. Each has their own goals, wants, and needs. In the workplace, each staff member may have a different perception about what needs to be done to resolve a problem. Often, people will assume that there needs to be a winner in a conflict. They may make no attempt to find a solution that is satisfactory for all parties. When conflict is handled in a manner that is healthy and open, it is more likely to result in a better solution.

There is constant conflict regarding resources, perceptions, and values. Conflict over resources are generally easier to resolve rather than conflict regarding perceptions and values. For example, if the chef and restaurant manager argue over the budget proposal for renovations to our café/restaurant, the conflict is about resources. Conflicts over values and beliefs are more complex. For example, the two managers may have a disagreement regarding the suitable way to involve staff in the decision-making process. One manager may believe that the boss should make the decision, rather than asking the opinion of others while the other wishes to consult the staff on every aspect of the proposal. The difficulty of resolving the conflict will be dependent on how strongly each person holds this belief.

There will be situations where conflicts and differences are unable to be resolved. There will be times that both parties will have to agree to disagree. The situation has been handled constructively when all parties have learnt to respect the other person’s point of view without feeling resentful, seeking revenge, or retaliating.

## Potential linguistic and cultural differences

**Cultural and linguistic diversity awareness** refers to the individual’s understanding of the differences between themselves and individuals from differing countries and backgrounds.

**Cultural and linguistic diversity** is the varying languages and cultural practices within the group.

**Inclusiveness** refers to the strategies and programs implemented by our organisation to include and embrace the strengths of all staff members, regardless of their background, language and what they can bring.

**Diversity** refers to the range of differences within the group of people we employ at BRTC.

### Workplace diversity

Our organisation takes pride in having a diverse workforce, made up of staff with a large range of characteristics and experience. Some key characteristics of workforce diversity includes race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, ability and sexual orientation.

### Benefits

The benefits of cultural diversity in a tourism business includes, but is not limited to:

* Improved customer service due to a diverse range of worker skills.
* The ability to appeal to a wide range of customer markets as staff may be able to assist with language barriers, as well as helping the organisation to understand different markets and catering to their needs.
* It helps to enable effective problem solving through multiple perspectives, this can help to increase productivity and creativity.

### Tolerance in the workplace

Tolerance involves maintaining an open mind during interactions with others, as well as treating all individuals with respect and sensitivity, despite whether you share the same opinions or values.

### Importance of respect and sensitivity

It is essential to be culturally sensitive to customers and other staff members when discussing actions, expectations and even meals that are from their culture. Learning the greeting and farewells are simple acts that can make customers from other countries feel valued and respected.

## Proactive strategies for promoting workplace diversity

Here at BRTC we proactively promote workplace diversity through a range of strategies. These include a recruitment policy that acknowledges cultural diversity, staff training, providing a list of support agencies and negotiating appropriate work practices for individual cultural needs (e.g. different work hours for those of the Islamic faith during Ramadan).

### Culturally appropriate work practices

A culturally appropriate workplace is one that all individuals speak to each other with respect and listen to other points of view. This is our organisation’s aim.

### Effective cross-cultural communication skills

Strategies that may be adopted to achieve effective cross-cultural communication include:

* Ensuring that all staff are respectful, sensitive and tolerant or all cultures, religions, other values and life choices
* Using basic language when dealing with all individuals that have limited English
* Seeking assistance from other colleagues or interpreters when appropriate.

### Identify workplace issues, problems and conflict

Australia is multicultural society. The skills that are required in our industry are relevant all over the world. Several of our staff that work in the tourism industry are likely to either be born overseas or have family born overseas with strong cultural ties to their countries of origin.

Generally, tourism organisations and businesses recognise the skills that these staff drawn from differing cultural backgrounds bring in providing multi-lingual skills and the knowledge of other customs and cultures. While operating as a team, cultural diversity should be acknowledged as an advantage. Two key aspects of teamwork involve being accepting of differing viewpoints and encouraging mutual understanding.

Varying cultures may view the same issue differently and have differing values. For example, in some cultures it is considered rude or impolite to look other people in the eyes while speaking to them, yet in other cultures it is considered that such action displays honesty and confidence. In some cultures, it is unacceptable to speak to a senior person until they have spoken to you, yet this is not the case within our own country.

Some individuals have specific religious requirements, such as not working on Saturdays, or having specific times to pray or wear certain clothing.

The understanding of another person’s culture is a beneficial way to establish a bond with other staff members.

When differing cultures meet, it is important for both sides to understand and respect the beliefs of the other parties. All parties should never try to impose their beliefs on others. If any party does not agree with the other’s views, respect their rights to have them and look for ways to work together.

## Misunderstandings and Conflict

The difference between aggressive, assertive and passive are as outlined below

***Aggressive:*** Being rude, disrespectful and disinterested in other people’s feelings, needs or thoughts.

***Assertive:*** Valuing the feelings, needs and thoughts of others. Engaging in active listening.

***Passive:*** Not speaking up, having the belief that their thoughts, feelings and needs are not important.

### Causes of misunderstandings and conflict

Causes of misunderstandings and conflict may include:

* Change
* The implementation of new technologies
* Interpersonal relationships between workers
* Different personalities
* External changes such as the economy or GFC
* Poor communication lines
* Harassment
* Limited resources

### Conflict - a positive or negative experience

Conflict may be a positive or negative experience, depending on how it is handled. If conflicts are handled correctly, all parties will feel as though they have won or have at least been listened to, and it results in a positive learning experience or an opportunity to express themselves. If the conflict is handled negatively, it may lead to low staff morale, staff turnover and litigation. All of these will result in the person having a bad experience.

### Conflict management

It is imperative that our organisation’s workplace policies and procedures related to managing conflict are understood, promoted within our workforce and followed.

The table below includes the indicators or signs of potential or actual conflict that may be evident through you ‘active listening’ or observing the persons:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Indicators identified by Active Listening** | **Indicators identified by Observing Body Language** |
| Sarcasm  Delayed feedback  Short aggressive sentences  Negative tone  Friction, tension or disharmony | Crossed arm or hands on hips  Starring, tapping fingers  Withdrawing.  Stressed or puzzled appearance.  Clenched teeth/rolling eyes.  Shaking head. |

Always seek assistance from work group members when issues, problems and conflict arise. Suggest possible ways of dealing with them as appropriate or refer them to the appropriate person in the higher management levels.

### Different approaches to conflict management

Understand the meanings of these different terms:

***Problem Solving*** – Finding a solution to difficult or complex issues.

***Negotiation*** – A discussion that is aimed at reaching an agreement.

***Mediation*** - The action or practice of mediating.

### Workplace policies and procedures - Managing conflict

While the following is standard in nearly all Australian workplace’s policies and procedures, it is worth repeating.

It is imperative that the conflict management arrangements that are in place within our organisation are used in conjunction with all our workplace policies and procedures. This provides a consistent guideline for employees on how to present any concerns to management and a method that is easily applicable for our employees’ concerns to be effectively resolved internally. Our workplace policies and procedures should be easily accessible and available for all staff.

### Seek assistance when conflicts arise

Occasionally, you may have to deal with an abusive or difficult customer. Customers may be annoyed or distressed about a situation and be seeking assistance to resolve the issue. Seek assistance from colleagues when you feel the issue is not being resolved or the customer is becoming more abusive and difficult. It is important to document and report all complaints to a supervisor or manager.

There are several factors that can contribute to ongoing conflict, including:

* Not being willing to resolve an issue.
* Holding a grudge against another individual.
* Feeling a sense of loss when a solution is found.
* Not being willing for judgements to be challenged and always wanting to be ‘right’.
* Having a fear of punishment.
* Pay offs, referring to when someone has something to gain from maintaining the conflict.
* Ineffective communication - this can prevent stakeholders from understanding each other, or it can make them defensive as well as unwilling to attempt to resolve an issue.
* Avoiding the real cause of the issue.
* Reaching an unsatisfactory solution - in some situations, the solution will be imposed on those involved and unwelcomed by all parties. Furthermore, the solution may only be temporary.
* Not handling negative feelings and emotions, such as frustration, fear and anger. These are most likely to grow when they are not acknowledged.
* Lack of confidence and avoiding confrontation due to lack of self-esteem.

Once a conflict has been identified, the next step is utilising conflict resolution skills in the most effective manner. There are several methods that can be used in conflict resolution. There are also several types of behaviour and communication skills that can used to assist this process.

During the process of conflict resolution, remember the following points:

* Pay attention to the customer or colleague
* Focus on the issue, rather than the person
* Identify the key points of the conflict
* Investigate by asking a diverse range of questions
* Clearly identify the outcome that the other person wants