

15 Tips for Managing Workplace Conflict

Guest Blog by Sean Flavin

While many of us may think of our jobs as a safe environment, workplace conflict has become a pervasive problem in the United States. According to a recent study, 85 percent of U.S. employees deal with workplace conflict on some level. When left unchecked, this turmoil can have a detrimental effect on both workplace safety and employee productivity.

To help organizational safety leaders understand the best methods for de-escalating workplace conflict, we invited Carol Cambridge, founder of The Stay Safe Project, to join our regular Risk Control Webinar Series. To recap the webinar, we broke Cambridge's presentation into four main themes with 15 helpful tips to help you de-escalate tense situations on the job.

Understanding the Situation

No. 1: Know the Employees and Their State of Mind

According to Cambridge, before diving into a de-escalation, it's important to ask yourself whether you're dealing with a difficult employee or simply an employee who is experiencing difficulty. The distinction is crucial here, and we need to approach the two instances very differently.

An excellent illustration of this is the challenges and chaos brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has left many employees dealing with hardships they've never known before. If your employee is acting uncharacteristically difficult, it's crucial to handle the situation with compassion, empathy, and understanding.

No. 2: Identify Personality Clashes

If the conflict stems from two employees who can't seem to get along, it's important to intervene quickly. Pay attention to your employees' dynamics and be ready to get involved early before things escalate.

Understanding Yourself

No. 3: Give Up the Need to Be Right

Remember that your objective is to resolve the conflict peacefully and effectively, not validate your position on the situation.

No. 4: Don't Take the Situation Personally

“What other people say about you is their reality, not yours,” Cambridge said. Make sure to remain objective and dispassionate while de-escalating conflicts.

No. 5: Don't Make Assumptions

We've all heard the old saying about what happens when you assume, so avoid becoming the butt of the episode by acting on hard evidence rather than emotions and preconceptions.

No. 6: Managing Your Responses

It's essential to understand your judgments, biases, and emotions to make sure they don't exacerbate the situation.

“Check in on your thoughts, beliefs, and triggers [before going into a tense situation],” said Cambridge. “Recognize them, acknowledge them, and see if you can shift your mindset on these. If you can, you will notice a big difference in how you come across and how quickly you are able to handle the situation.”

To understand what triggers our emotion, Cambridge introduced the term “Amygdala high-jacking.”

“When something happens to trigger our emotions — or pushes our hot buttons as we often call it — it closes the gate on the logical section of our brains, [which] triggers a potential threat or an emotional charge,” said Cambridge. “We call that emotional charge an ‘Amygdala high-jacking.’”

No. 7: Know How to Handle “Triggers”

Triggers — or actions that set off emotional responses in our brains — often stem from traumatic experiences, bad relationships, and other events that impress themselves on our subconscious.

“We cannot control how someone else feels or know what triggers them,” said Cambridge. “That’s why the more adaptable and flexible we are with both our verbal and non-verbal communications — the easier it is to de-escalate.”

We can, however, control how we respond to our triggers. Cambridge recommended using the mnemonic device “Control – Alt – Delete.”

- Control myself
- Alter my thinking
- Delete negativity, anxiety, frustration, anger, etc. (whichever applies)

Communicating Verbally

No. 8: Use Simple Language

When emotions are running hot, there’s no time for complex, esoteric verbiage. To de-escalate tense situations, try using simple, straightforward language — Cambridge recommended somewhere around a sixth-grade level.

No. 9: Establish Rapport

Build trust with the employee by being authentic, acknowledging the problem, and understanding their feelings. Establishing a rapport will validate the employee and let them know that they have been heard.

No. 10: Avoid Specific Words and Phrases

Cambridge recommended avoiding language that can put someone on the defensive and derail constructive dialogue; examples include:

- Telling the person to “Calm Down.”
- Saying that you understand (unless you do)
- Using terms that are too definitive (“always,” “never,” etc.), negative, or judgmental.

- Asking potentially accusatory questions like “why did this happen?” or “why did you do this?”
- Being sarcastic.

No. 11: Use Neutral Language

“Sometimes people just need to know that we care enough to hear their frustration regardless of whether it’s entirely justified,” said Cambridge. “Using neutral language helps them to understand that you are listening.”

Cambridge offered some tips for using neutral language, including using words like “navigate” to make the resolution more of a collaboration. Other neutral language examples include:

- “My experience of the situation is...”
- “We may have experienced the situation differently.”
- “Is this doable?” (Instead of “I don’t think this will work.”)
- “Will you elaborate?” (Instead of “what’s your point?”)
- “I have a hard time hearing what you are saying when you raise your voice.” (Instead of “if you’re going to raise your voice, I won’t listen.”)

Communicating Non-Verbally

No. 12: Get to a Place of Neutrality Quickly

When conflict arises, make sure you give off a completely neutral vibe. Being neutral allows you to create voluntary compliance among the involved parties that lets them know they have your undivided attention and you aren’t there to judge them. According to Cambridge, it’s essential to quickly get to this place of neutrality (within 15 seconds or so) to make sure the situation doesn’t escalate further.

No. 13: Use Neutral Body Language

Here are some tips to make sure your body language remains neutral when de-escalating conflict:

- Stand in a neutral position: If you’re standing, keep an open, non-aggressive stance with your feet hip-width apart. (If they sit down, you should sit as well.)

- Make sure your hands are empty and visible: This allows the other person to know you don't have any weapons while also allowing you to protect yourself if things get ugly.
- Stay in the "Safety Zone" — roughly 3-4 feet away from the other person.
- Keep appropriate eye contact: Avoid prolonged eye contact but do look at the person. If you look down at the floor or in another direction, they will perceive it as fear.
- Use neutral facial expressions: No frowns, smiles, or other emotional indicators.
- Setting Yourself Up for a Positive Resolution

No. 14: Prepare for the Worst

The greatest fear in a conflict, according to Cambridge, is that an employee who was involved will react violently (especially if they're disciplined). While we won't dive into the worst of worst-case scenarios here, Cambridge has a lot of expertise with this topic and has produced a video series on active shooter situations to help companies respond, which you can check out on her website.

No. 15: Be Aware of Your Surroundings

To keep a conflict from turning into a confrontation, it's crucial to be aware of your surroundings. Situational awareness starts with being prepared and familiar with potential dangers.

"You can train yourself to be more aware of your surroundings," Cambridge said. "You are responsible for the safety of your team members (the one that's causing problems and everyone else).

"Situational awareness means that you have a feel for what's happening with personality conflicts, bullying, power struggles, and all potential for violence."

– *Written by Sean Flavin*