

Conflict Resolution: Using the "Interest-Based Relational" Approach

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"If it's a good idea, go ahead and do it. It is much easier to apologize than it is to get permission."

Admiral Grace Hopper, PhD

Editor's Note: The following article on "Conflict Resolution: Using the Interest-Based Relational [IBR] Approach" is from Mind Tools [www.mindtools.com]. Trust you will find it as informative and useful as me.

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Conflict is an inevitable part of work. We've all seen situations where people with different goals and needs have clashed, and we've all witnessed the often intense personal animosity that can result. As you'll learn in this article, the fact that conflict exists, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. When you resolve it effectively, you can also eliminate many of the hidden problems that it brought to the surface.

Resolve conflict effectively by treating everybody involved with respect. There are other benefits that you might not expect, such as:

- **Increased understanding.** Going through the process of resolving conflict expands people's awareness, and gives them an insight into how they can achieve their goals without undermining others.
- **Better group cohesion.** When you resolve conflict effectively, team members can develop stronger mutual respect, and a renewed faith in their ability to work together.
- **Improved self-knowledge.** Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals and expectations closely, helping them to understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness.

But conflict can also be damaging. If you don't handle it effectively, it can quickly turn into personal dislike, teamwork can break down, and talent may be wasted as people disengage from their work and leave. If you want to keep your team members working effectively, despite coming into conflict with one another, you need to stop this downward spiral as soon as you can. To do this, it helps to understand one of the key processes for effective conflict resolution: the Interest-Based Relational approach.

The Interest-Based Relational Approach

When conflict arises, it's easy for people to get entrenched in their positions and for tempers to flare, voices to rise, and body language to become defensive or aggressive. You can avoid all of this by using the Interest-Based Relational (IBR) approach.

Roger Fisher and William Ury developed the IBR approach and published it in their 1981 book, Getting to Yes. They argue that you should resolve conflicts by separating people and their emotions from the problem. Their approach also focuses on building mutual respect and understanding, and it encourages you to resolve conflict in a united, cooperative way.

The approach is based on the idea that your role as a manager is not simply to resolve conflict but to ensure that team members feel respected and understood, and that you appreciate their differences. In essence, it helps you to manage conflict in a civil and "grown up" way.

During the process, your focus should be on behaving courteously and consensually, and on insisting that others do the same. Your priority is to help each side develop an understanding of the other's position, and to encourage both to reach a consensus – even if that means agreeing to disagree.

To use the IBR approach effectively, everyone involved should listen actively and empathetically, have a good understanding of body language, be emotionally intelligent, and understand how to employ different anger management techniques. In particular, you and the conflicting parties need to follow these six steps:

1. **Make sure that good relationships are a priority.** Treat the other person with respect. Do your best to be courteous, and to discuss matters constructively.
2. **Separate people from problems.** Recognize that, in many cases, the other person is not "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. By separating the problem from the person, you can discuss issues without damaging relationships.
3. **Listen carefully to different interests.** You'll get a better grasp of why people have adopted their position if you try to understand their point of view.
4. **Listen first, talk second.** You should listen to what the other person is saying before defending your own position. They might say something that changes your mind.
5. **Set out the "facts."** Decide on the observable facts that might impact your decision, together.
6. **Explore options together.** Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you might reach it jointly.

You can often prevent contentious discussions from turning bad by following these guidelines, and they can help you avoid the antagonism and dislike that can cause conflict to spiral out of control. However, bear in mind that the IBR approach may not be appropriate for all situations. For example, you may not be able to resolve differences in such a consensual, collaborative way if your organization is in a crisis. On these occasions, you may have to "pull rank" as a leader and make quick decisions about disputes and conflicts.

Note: When you use the IBR approach, it's also a good idea to familiarize yourself with other models for resolving conflict, so that you can adjust your actions as appropriate. (See Mind

Tools articles on the [Conflict Layer Model](#) and [Bell and Hart's Eight Causes of Conflict](#) for more on this topic.)

Putting the IBR Approach Into Practice

Let's follow each of the six steps of the IBR approach by applying them to a conflict resolution scenario.

Imagine that you run a paper products manufacturing company and you work closely with two managers, Roger and Juanita. Roger heads up production and is eager to buy a new machine that will increase his department's output. Juanita works in purchasing and is keen to reduce costs. She understands Roger's motivation but informs him that the organization won't be making any new purchases. This has created conflict and tension that is spreading throughout the workplace.

Step 1: Make Sure Good Relationships Are a Priority

As a manager, your priority in any conflict situation is to take control early and maintain good relationships within your team. Make sure that everyone understands how the conflict could be a mutual problem, and that it's important to resolve it through respectful discussion and negotiation, rather than aggression. Make it clear that it's essential for people to be able to work together happily, effectively and without resentment, so that the team and organization can function effectively.

So, in our example situation with Roger and Juanita, you might facilitate a face-to-face meeting with them to clarify the importance of good relationships and to identify the main problems. Tell them that you respect their points of view, and that you appreciate their cooperation and desire to resolve the situation. You should also make it clear that everyone needs to work together to build and preserve relationships that allow the organization to achieve its goals.

Step 2: Separate People From Problems

At this point, it's important to let team members know that conflict is rarely one-sided, and that it's best to resolve it collaboratively, by addressing the problem rather than the personalities involved. The problem is caused by neither person, but they do need to work together to resolve it.

So, in our example, Juanita may initially think that Roger is the problem. She believes that he is being defensive and demanding, but you should point out that she is focusing on the **person** instead of the **problem**. The problem is whether the organization can afford the new equipment.

Step 3: Listen Carefully to Different Interests

It's important that everyone understands each party's underlying interests, needs and concerns. So, take a positive stance, keep the conversation courteous, and avoid blaming anyone. Ask for each person's viewpoint, and confirm that you need his or her cooperation to

solve the problem. Ask your team members to make an effort to understand one another's motivations and goals, and to think about how those may affect their actions.

Encourage everyone to use active listening skills, such as looking directly at the speaker, listening carefully, nodding, and allowing each person to finish before talking. By following these guidelines, everyone will be able to hear and understand one another's positions and perceptions. Focusing on listening will also help to prevent the conversation from becoming heated and getting out of hand.

Once everyone knows that their views have been heard, they are more likely to be receptive to different perspectives. In our example, perhaps Juanita didn't realize the amount of pressure that Roger was under to meet his production targets. Similarly, Roger may have assumed that Juanita was being unfair when she had a mandate to cut costs.

Tip: If the conversation becomes heated or your team members aren't listening to one another, remind them sensitively that it's important to work together and to stay calm. (Read Mind Tools articles on [Dealing With Difficult People](#), [Managing Your Emotions at Work](#), and [Dealing With Angry People](#) for more on how to defuse tense situations.)

Step 4: Listen First, Talk Second

Encourage each team member to listen to other people's points of view, without defending their own position. Make sure that each person has finished talking before someone else speaks, emphasize that you want to resolve the situation through discussion and negotiation, and ensure that listeners understand the problem fully by asking questions for further clarification. Be sure to focus on work issues and leave personalities out of the discussion. You should also encourage everyone to:

- Listen with empathy, and to see the conflict from each participant's point of view.
- Explain issues clearly and concisely.
- Encourage people to use "I" rather than "you" statements, so that no one feels attacked.
- Be clear about their feelings.
- Remain flexible and adaptable.

Once you've listened to everyone's needs and concerns, outline the behaviors and actions that you will or won't tolerate, and gain the opposing parties' agreement to change. In our example, Juanita and Roger were both keen to get their opinions across, so they didn't listen to what the other had to say. Once they did listen, they began to understand the situation more clearly.

Step 5: Set out the "Facts"

This sounds like an obvious step, but different underlying needs, interests and goals can often cause people to perceive problems differently. You'll need to agree on the problem that you are trying to solve before you can find a mutually acceptable solution, and you should agree the facts that are relevant to the situation.

Sometimes, people will see different but interlocking problems. So, if you can't reach an agreement, you should aim to understand the other person's perception of the problem. In our example, the "facts" are that a new machine would improve the production department's output, meet customer demand, and increase sales. But it would cost so much that it would impact on the company's profitability.

Step 6: Explore Options Together

By this stage, you may have resolved the conflict. Each side will likely understand the other's position better, and the most appropriate solution might be obvious. However, you may also have uncovered some serious differences. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be useful, so that you can find a solution that satisfies everyone. Or you might need to take action to change the fundamental circumstances that have caused the conflict.

By asking each team member to help generate solutions, you ensure that everyone feels included and that they're more likely to be satisfied with the outcome. Brainstorm ideas and be open to all suggestions, including ones you might not have considered before.

Key Points

- Conflict in the workplace can destroy good teamwork. When you don't manage it effectively, real and legitimate differences between people can quickly get out of control, which can result in an irretrievable breakdown in communication.
- Use the Interest-Based Relational approach to resolve difficult conflict situations, by being courteous and non-confrontational, focusing on issues rather than individuals, and listening carefully to each person's point of view.
- You'll find that when people listen and explore the facts, issues and possible solutions carefully, you can resolve conflict effectively.

Apply This To Your Life

Are you trying to resolve a conflict between your team members? Have you found it difficult to get everyone to agree? Try using the IBR approach:

- Set up a meeting between the conflicting parties to discuss the issue.
- Let them know that you are there to work together to find a solution, and that they need to focus on the problem, not the person.
- Ask them to listen carefully to one another's point of view, and to use active listening skills, so that everyone feels heard.
- Be clear about the facts and then work together to agree on a resolution.
- Get practice by focusing on a relatively mild conflict first, and then try it on a more significant one.

As always, your questions, comments and criticisms are welcome. Feel free to contact me in care of email: William.moylan@emich.edu

Best regards,

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