

4 Ways to Manage Conflict in the Office

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Guidelines on how to resolve conflict when you're the new guy (or gal) in the office.

Congratulations are in order: You got yourself a wonderful new job! You've completed your on-boarding, have a good feel for what's needed and an even better feel for what's expected of you. What's more, you are already exerting a positive influence.

But wait. Conflict and drama alert.

Examples of conflict rearing its head early in a job include:

- Someone just said something, and you find yourself rolling your eyes in aggravation and impatience.
- You just said something, and someone got surprisingly argumentative and demeaning.
- Someone else spoke, and several others shut down and started drifting away.
- Having witnessed this all before, you too, are starting to think about giving up and going home.

It'd be okay if this were a one-time occurrence. But it's not — it's happening increasingly. And you see how it's affecting you: Your brain's gone numb. Your mood has soured. You've stopped reaching out to brainstorm and collaborate. You're guarded and on edge, less engaged, more inflexible. None of this is good.

You must figure out how to deal with all of this. It's time — as Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan, authors of "Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader," say — for you to become more *personally competent* in dealing with all of this conflict.

Conflict like this can make or break a career. That's why I decided to get certified and provide advice on how to react in these situations. (Note: The information here is used with permission from *The Center for Conflict Dynamics*.)



How to be conflict competent...

To become more conflict competent, you need a real grasp of the following **three factors**:

1. Constructive responses -- Behaviors that keep conflict to a minimum

2. Destructive responses -- Behaviors that escalate, or prolong conflict

3. Hot buttons -- Those irritations and annoyances that provoke you into conflict and trigger you into reacting in *conflict- incompetent* ways

The Conflict Dynamics Profile, an assessment that specifically deals with conflict behaviors in the workplace, illustrates:

Constructive responses are task focused, while destructive ones focus on personalities. And *all* conflict begins with a precipitating event, frequently in which a participant's "hot buttons" are pushed.

It happens in an instant. Someone says or does something — intentionally or otherwise — that, as Runde and Flanagan say, "causes us to believe that their interests, goals, principles or feelings are incompatible with, and threatening to, our own."

More viscerally, we're flooded with emotions: anger, fear and frustration. Our fight/flight instinct kicks in with an immediacy and intensity that quickly overwhelms. We're out of our game, wanting to lash out, or go run and hide ... or both. In other words, we've been triggered.

It's important to realize that becoming more conflict competent is an iterative process. You'll do well for a while, and then you won't; you'll start improving again, and then you'll slip. The following haikus really say it all:

I got a new job / The people are really great / Except when they're not.

I cannot change them / I can only change myself / so I must now change.

Adrenaline rush / Undeniable tension / I have been triggered.

Hot buttons cooling / Triggers all under control / Except when they're not.

So, to decrease the impact of your missteps, take the following advice to heart:

1. Make a U-turn. If you get triggered into taking a conversation somewhere you didn't intend to go, stop, turn around and go in a different direction. Sometimes even a GPS knows that the best move is to make a U-turn when possible.

2. Apologize as soon as you say it. If you get triggered into saying something you regret, apologize right then and there. A well-timed, well-intentioned apology is not a sign of weakness — it's a sign of respect, regard, clarity and executive civility.

3. Pause. As soon as you realize you've been triggered, pause and before saying another word, let your adrenaline surge and silently dissipate. Soothe with a benign smile.

4. Anticipate and reward. If you know you're going to be in a stressful, trigger-happy environment, do something decidedly pleasing for yourself beforehand, as we're naturally more composed and trigger-resistant when we're fully rested and recharged.

With practice and persistence, it will become easier to stay poised in the moment and not let your hot buttons control you.

From there, you can start focusing on how best to maximize your constructive responses to conflict while further minimizing the destructive ones.

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