

Diagnosing Conflict: *A Worksheet for Managers and Supervisors*

This worksheet is designed for managers addressing staff conflicts related to **productivity, conduct, and communication**. This tool is designed to address emergent conflicts when they can still be dealt with through skilled management *before* the issue escalates into a complaint or grievance.

As a manager, you wield unique positional authority that can help staff members embroiled in conflict. Your role requires you to uphold consistent standards, support and develop staff, and promote a culture that supports respect and collaboration—all of which are essential for improving staff experiences related to conflict.

This tool identifies some **common conflicts** that occur at organizations, provides a basic frame to address those conflicts, and offers reflection questions to help you diagnose the type of conflict you are navigating.

Developing a diagnosis and pathway to address conflict requires having access to **quality information**. You'll likely need to ask questions, have a follow up conversation, possibly speak to other staff members, or request to see documents or other materials. With that information in hand, you can then work on developing a diagnosis of the situation.

Diagnosing a conflict will require you to:

1. Evaluate **the health** of the conflict.
2. **Gather Information**
3. **Diagnose** the root of the conflict
4. Determine a **pathway forward**
5. **Reflect** on the process to learn from it

1. How un/healthy is the conflict?

Though conflict doesn't always *feel* good, it can be quite healthy for your team and work. Healthy conflicts help you leverage the diversity of your group such as ways of thinking, leadership styles, or qualities of experience. Navigating those differences through healthy conflict can help your team improve their understanding of problems and create stronger solutions.



Personal grudges, attacks on character

Focused on issues & tasks, not people

Disrespectful communication, triangulation, or undermining

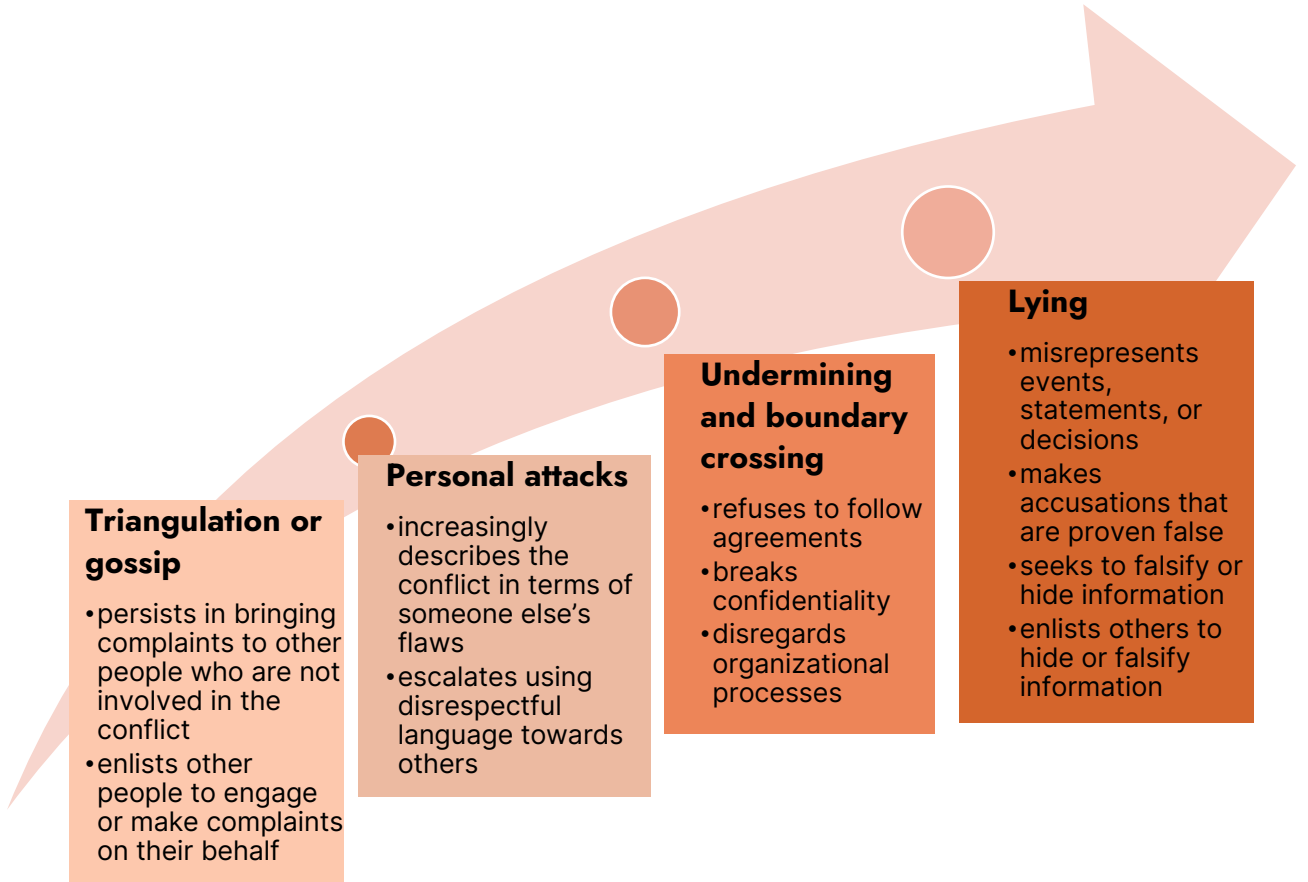
Relevant differences of opinion are brought forward; information is shared to clarify concerns

Emotions are unmanageable or used to justify poor behavior

Emotions are present but manageable

If you see signs that the conflict is becoming *unhealthy*, be prepared to uphold standards for conduct and communication, possibly offer a reprimand, and even place limitations on your staff. Key behaviors in unhealthy conflicts create mischief, derail processes, and harm your organization's culture. Be prepared to address these behaviors through direct feedback *as soon as you become aware of them*. If they persist, you will need to engage HR practices related to performance and conduct.

OBJ



How Unhealthy/Healthy is the conflict?

Mark where this conflict falls on the spectrum



Notes:

2. Gather Information

Though you may be called on to act and react quickly or “solve” a staff member’s conflict, you won’t be able to do be of meaningful help without access to quality, verified information. People in conflict often have a narrow perspective of the matter. Set a reasonable but limited amount of time to gather information. Be clear about what that will entail—will you need to look at their calendar, review documents or other communication, or check in with other people who were present for an incident?

<p>What Happened? <i>You may need to invite the perspectives or input of other people at your organization</i></p>	
<p>Is there more to the story? <i>What else may be contributing to this? You may need to check in with other managers/ supervisors at your organization</i></p>	
<p>How are you corroborating or confirming this information? <i>To be as objective and balanced as possible, ensure your information is confirmed and can be verified by others.</i></p>	
<p>What else could help you understand this situation better? <i>Check in with your staff policies or human resources. Enlist the advice of others while supporting confidentiality within your organization.</i></p>	

Staff Experience of the Conflict

Understanding staff experience of the conflict is essential for supporting a healthy and ongoing supervisor relationship with them. Having this insight can inform the pace, focus, and sequence of conversations you have with them.

<p>Role in the conflict <i>Are they instigating, a direct party, someone who is pulled in, someone who is creating conflict for others?</i></p>	
<p>Current navigation of the conflict <i>How clearly do they understand and currently navigate the conflict? What conflict style do they seem to be using?</i></p>	

<p>Impacts of the conflict How is this impacting them on a personal level and others on the team or within the organization?</p>	
<p>Skill and capacity to engage How skilled are they at managing their feelings and engaging with the person they are in conflict with? Are they able to be clear and focused, are they willing to negotiate and hear other perspectives?</p>	
<p>Desired solutions What do they want to see happen, and how rigid are they about the solutions to pursue?</p>	
<p>Participant motivations and needs What might be keeping them engaged in the conflict? What else might be motivating them around this issue?</p>	

Notes on Information Gathered

3. Diagnose the Conflict

Be curious, ask questions, and gently investigate the situation in order to understand what may be at its root. You will likely be notified of the conflict from one person's standpoint, which is just part of the picture.

What the source of the conflict may be	
How to coach and support staff	
what tendencies are contributing to the conflict?	
what changed actions or behaviors can improve the situation	
give feedback to help improve the quality of communication	
what options they have, what choices they make	
what might happen if this escalates or continues to remain unresolved	
What resources the organization can provide	
Possible action steps for the staff member involved	

4. Determine a Pathway Forward

After you've looked into and reviewed the matter, devise your pathway. Many organizational conflicts tend to fall within a few basic categories, sometimes simultaneously. If you can see which elements of the conflict relate most to the following categories, you will have a stronger basis for your pathway.

Disagreement over a task, process, or decision that was made

Disagreement can express itself as vocal disagreement, disparagement, undermining, or even noncompliance (failing to follow through on basic tasks, refusing meetings, etc).

Though disruptive, disagreement can be resolved by clarifying standards, roles, priorities, or confirming decision making.

It may be helpful to identify the various conflict styles at play and coaching staff to use different approaches.

Managers who take the time to listen and affirm staff experiences can resolve disagreements while still upholding organizational roles and processes. Helping staff members understand their role within the broader system can help foster respect for other areas of work and responsibility.

Challenges in productivity, conduct, or communication

If the person you manage is underperforming, behaving poorly, or upsetting others with the way they communicate, you will need to provide clear, direct, and explicit feedback to that staff member and work with them to address those challenges and track improvement.

You will likely need to determine the root cause of these challenges, which may result in supporting them with prioritization, workplan management, or even identifying training and professional development to address their needs.

Challenges related to another colleague's productivity, conduct, or communication

A staff member may have conflict related to another colleague's productivity, conduct, or communication.

Depending on the nature of those challenges and who you directly supervise, you may find yourself coaching someone to provide direct feedback and assert boundaries while also managing someone else with their performance and conduct challenges.

Be sensitive to how positional power or identity may be impacting the conflict while remaining steadfast in upholding consistent standards. Make sure to track the conflict and take responsibility for escalating this into formal processes if other management measures don't improve the situation.

Notes on Diagnosis & Pathway Forward

5. Reflect on the Process

After you've supported your staff member related to this issue, do not forget to take a moment to reflect and learn about your management skills and support for your staff.

What happened after this conflict was brought to my attention?	
Am I satisfied with how I managed it?	
How do impacted individuals feel about the organization's response?	
How does conflict tend to evolve at the organization?	
How does conflict tend to resolve or dissipate at the organization?	
Are these practices healthy and supportive for staff resilience and function?	
How did I resource myself throughout this experience?	