

The Office Salad Dressing: Steps to Resolve Workplace Conflicts

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Are members of your staff like oil and water – not mixing well enough to become a team? As a manager, you've seen the stress involved, and are not immune to their feelings as well as the pressure from your own boss about budgets, time constraints and deadlines. Tempers can flare at a moment's notice and conflict can have serious consequences.

At the foundation of stress is communication; more often than not it is due to the lack of communication. When we encounter a situation that we believe we are not in control of, our "fight or flight" reaction kicks in. In most situations, the "flight" is not an option. We *react* instead of *respond*.

So how do you deal with these potentially explosive challenges? Let's look at three scenarios:

1. The conflict: Sally, a purchasing manager, is a fast-talker and skims over details. She has just resolved a crisis that took several hours (and is exhausted from the effort). Tom, one of her suppliers, is a slower-paced talker who calls her to confirm the particulars on a proposal. Sally feels pressured to make up for her lost morning. Tom, wanting to thoroughly understand what he will be bidding on, thinks there is ambiguity. Based on their previous interactions, Sally knows she needs to slow down how fast she talks to lessen their frustration.

Tom feels she is patronizing him, even when Sally speaks slowly. He becomes defensive and stubborn, and his voice tone reflects that. She hears his defensiveness and that fuels her defensiveness.

The resolution: Sally should ask Tom if they can postpone the conversation. That should give Tom knowledge that her impatience will be more prevalent if they talk now.

If Tom needs to get his questions answered immediately, they need to be aware of each other's schedules, stress levels and reactions.

Tom needs to disregard Sally's tone of voice and focus on the words she says. He also needs to focus on the most important questions, even if it means he won't ask every single question. Sally needs to realize Tom's attention to details is part of his personality, and his frustration will increase if he doesn't get his questions answered.

2. The Conflict: Manager Linda has been putting off this performance discussion with Jack, her direct report, because she thinks Jack is too agreeable – he seems to waffle on decisions and won't justify his actions. She knows this meeting will

take too much time and not enough will be accomplished.

Jack, too, is dreading this meeting. Linda is impatient and interrupts or cuts him off before he can fully explain himself. Then he gets flustered and feels uncomfortable. He wishes she would tell him what she wants done and how she wants it done.

The more frustrated Linda gets, the faster and louder she talks. The more stressed Jack gets, the quieter he gets. Linda perceives Jack as being weak, which causes her to become more argumentative. Jack translates this into her being intimidating, and he reacts by withdrawing more.

The Resolution: Linda and Jack are at opposite ends of the behavioral scale. Linda's aggressiveness is heightened by Jack's submissiveness. Neither one realizes the effect they are having on each other.

Linda needs to become more aware of her voice tone – whether it sounds harsh, loud, sarcastic, angry, condescending, or frustrated. She also can look at Jack's body language; it is telling her that he is uncomfortable.

Jack needs to understand what his body language is saying. As difficult as it may be, he needs to sit up, look Linda in the eye, and calmly explain his actions.

He is looking for Linda to like him and be his friend when what he can look for is Linda's respect.

3. The Conflict: One particular meeting's agenda items were crucial to the success of the current project. Several key decisions have to be made and implemented quickly. True to form, Jane is laughing and telling stories with little regard for the time crunch. John's irritation is growing and he can't understand why no one, especially the boss, is taking control of the situation.

The Resolution: Jane and John deal with stress in their own way, yet they don't realize it. Each expects the other person to *act* the same way, instead they are both *reacting*. Jane's stories need to be toned down without alienating her, and John needs to stop taking the meeting so critically.

When the meeting leader realizes Jane is telling another animated story, he can say, "Jane that sounds great and we'd love to hear about it! We need to keep this meeting running on time ... how about if you tell us about it later?" Saying this with a smile and in a light tone of voice will keep her defenses down, yet give her the recognition that she needs.

When John begins to dig down to the minutia he feels comfortable with, he needs to realize that's his way of dealing with stress. John needs to be given time, outside the formal meeting, to research alternatives and adjust to the decisions made.

4. The Conflict: Alice is “all business” at the office, and expects others to be the same. The team has stopped asking her to join them for lunch because her response is always “no.” They consider her standoffish and aloof because she does not share personal information. Alice keeps conversations focused on deadlines and projects, and is quick to return to her desk immediately afterwards. If her knowledge was not such an integral component of the team’s performance, no one would interact with her.

The Resolution: Alice prefers facts, figures and tasks over interacting with people. She does not consider herself rude or distant – in fact she shares her knowledge with all her team members. Alice is not purposely aloof ... she prefers to get close to the team by working closely in the office environment. If the team approaches her as a group, she may feel intimidated. One team member should ask Alice to stay after a meeting and emphasize from a business standpoint the bottom line results of reaching out in a personal way to others. Stress the value to her when others can appreciate her talents in a personal way.

It’s also important to talk to the team members and let them know that Alice is not snubbing them ... she just prefers distance. Realizing that Alice will never be as chummy as they are with each other can mitigate some of the conflict.

Each of these situations can be resolved if those involved become aware of what their hot buttons are, and the effect their reaction has on the other person. A leader can easily step in and work with each employee to see the other person’s strengths and weaknesses, and how they affect their point of view.

Knowing our behaviors are in direct response to our perceptions allows us to view the situation more objectively. It takes a conscious awareness and a lot of deep breaths to respond, and not react. The rewards make it worth the effort.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shari Frisinger, corporate trainer, consultant and speaker, helps companies with management, communication and teamwork challenges. Shari is author of the forthcoming book, “Communication Replugged,” which is based on nearly 10 years of research on how effective communication can lead to exceptional leadership and teamwork. As President of CornerStone Strategies LLC, she’s worked with companies of all sizes, including corporations like Pfizer, General Mills and Johnson & Johnson. To hire her for speaking or training programs, visit [.cornerstonestrategiesllc.com](http://www.cornerstonestrategiesllc.com) or call 281-992-4136.

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