

Why Most People Avoid Conflict... and Why You Shouldn't

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If you can think and talk, and if you ever encounter other people, there is the potential for conflict. Conflict is an inevitable, completely normal part of the human condition, yet most people readily admit that they intentionally avoid anything that even remotely resembles disagreement or confrontation. In fact, much of my work in therapy and coaching involves helping people to understand – and even embrace – the value of conflict and overcome the fears that feed their aversion.

There are many factors that can influence conflict avoidance, such as self-doubt, lack of assertiveness, inadequate communication skills, fear of rejection, disapproval, criticism, or loss of security and more. In other words, people avoid conflict to minimize perceived threats to their self-esteem and sense of well-being.

Let me be clear – I'm all for avoiding real danger and I never recommend that anyone intentionally subject themselves to hostile conflict or confrontations that present a threat to their safety. But I do advocate learning the difference between actual danger and personal discomfort and then developing the courage and skill necessary to approach everything from mild disagreement to vigorous debate.

Overcoming the fear of discomfort due to conflict is important for three primary reasons:

First, conflict avoidance often leads to emotional suppression. When we bury our emotions we always “bury them alive” which means they can fester and show up when we least expect it, often causing us and others unnecessary pain. It's common for people to use “letting it go this time” as a cover for conflict avoidance. If the issue hasn't really been resolved, it could blow up as an over-reaction later.

The second reason is that avoidance of conflict reinforces irrational fear. For example, “If I address this concern I'll be rejected, hurt, or criticized,” or, “I'll look foolish and feel humiliated if I speak up.” Although you can experience

hurt feelings or embarrassment, the truth is they won't destroy or devastate you like you fear they may. The best way to overcome irrational fears is by facing them, doing the best you can to negotiate the conflict and then give yourself an honest assessment of how well you handled it. Each time you go through this process, you gain skill, experience, and confidence, which leads me to my third point:

By avoiding conflict, you miss opportunities for growth. Growth always involves change, and even positive changes often involve some level of tension and discomfort. To choose to avoid conflict is to choose personal stagnation – the opposite of growth.

Next time you find yourself in a situation where confrontation is needed or where conflict arises, remember that it's worth the effort to solve the problem and achieve the solution, and you will come out stronger each time you succeed. You really have nothing to fear but *fear* itself!

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Dr. Todd

<https://www.relationaladvantage.com/blog/why-most-people-avoid-conflict-and-why-you-shouldn-t>

Addressing Conflict Avoidance in the Workplace



By Stuart Hearn on 17 Apr, 2017

Conflict is a performance management issue that needs to be addressed, not ignored.

At first, conflict avoidance might sound like a good thing. After all, so many of us naturally avoid conflict in one way or another — but there is a difference between creating a healthy environment where conflict is rare and avoiding conflict when it presents itself. The former is a wise human resources move — the latter is a mistake that **comes at a high price** for companies.

Many employees want to be seen as pleasant and easygoing, so much so that they do anything to avoid a fight. They do this with all the goodwill in the world, but unfortunately, this makes them **just as responsible as aggressive colleagues** when it comes to creating a negative working environment. **Conflict is a part of every workplace** — and that's okay. It's when we avoid conflict that problems arise. We aren't able to address concerns that need addressing, decision making is delayed and managers are unable to improve existing processes in a healthy manner.

How Our Brains Handle Conflict (the Science of Conflict Avoidance)

You might have heard that human beings are innately social creatures — and this is the truth. Our desire to be accepted, to be “part of the tribe” is hardwired into us and it influences so many of our day-to-day decisions.

We want to belong. **We fear being ostracised** — which leads to a fear of conflict. Though on a practical level, we might understand that conflict avoidance is unhealthy and can escalate, our natural tendency is to take the easier road and to let things slide — making us naturally conflict avoidant. When we encounter conflict, the **animalistic instincts in our limbic system** kicks into gear, undermining communication and teamwork. Even managers are guilty of this behaviour — they often put off getting involved in conflict between team members. But conflict management is an important leadership trait for the modern manager and one we will be discussing shortly.

Why Conflict Avoidance Is Harmful to Business

The Thomas Kilmann grid looks upon conflict avoidance as a lose-lose proposition, given that it doesn't serve to address the issue at hand. After all, **if problems are never raised, how can our businesses ever improve?**

The **negative side-effects of conflict avoidance** are often **high turnover**, a dysfunctional working environment, **strained communication**, a loss of productivity and impaired teamwork. **Your company reputation will also suffer, making it all the more difficult to recruit**

top performers in the future. For these reasons, conflict avoidance and interpersonal conflict is a performance management issue that all HR execs should address.

The Main Examples of Conflict Avoidance in the Workplace

Organisations **will not be able to succeed in the long term without addressing conflict** head-on. The ability to recognise conflict — and to make steps towards conflict resolution — will be a **huge benefit to any company**.

To do this, we must first understand the **different forms that conflict avoidance takes**. Below, we'll explore the three main manifestations of conflict avoidance in the workplace.

1. SIMPLY IGNORING THE ISSUE AT HAND

A common form of conflict avoidance is to deny there is an issue at all. As an example, two colleagues might disagree regarding an approach to a particular problem. Both feel passionately about their solution and yet, rather than insisting they explore the pros and cons of each avenue, one party simply backs down and refuses to assert themselves. They might have a legitimate argument, so refraining from honest discussion does nothing for the company in terms of productivity and progress.

Another example might be if one employee feels they are the victim of workplace bullying, but doesn't take the initiative to discuss it with their manager or HR. They might insist they are fine and there is no problem. But as the root cause isn't being addressed, they will ultimately suffer from a **loss of morale and productivity**.

2. A CHANGE OF CONVERSATION

Another form of conflict avoidance is side-stepping. This is a diversionary tactic and a surefire way of ensuring no issues ever get resolved, as whenever a particular issue is brought up, the employee in question changes the conversation or raises other, unrelated issues.

For example, during a **one-on-one performance discussion**, a manager might ask an employee about their goal progress and why they haven't been able to hit their targets for a particular objective. In response, the employee might derail the conversation to discuss a completely unrelated matter or raise tangential issues that don't progress the conversation.

3. COMPLETE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE SITUATION

This is a common form of conflict avoidance, particularly for introverts. When difficult or adversarial conversations present themselves, the employee might appear to close down. People who use this coping strategy often **feel their approach is beneficial**, as

they aren't outwardly aggressive. However, a silent approach can be just as damaging in the long run, as they are failing to address the issue at hand.

This approach of complete disengagement means nothing of value is contributed. The employee may be waiting for the storm to pass, but in all likelihood, if a particular topic is at all anxiety-provoking, they won't be inclined to visit it later, even when emotions have died down.

How to Address Conflict Avoidance and Embrace Conflict in Your Organisation

It is clear that from a performance management and employee relations point of view that workplace conflict needs to be addressed head-on. Employees need to feel valued and listened to, and companies must handle conflict in a structured way. The situation needs to be resolved through open, honest communication and frank exchange of ideas. Co-workers should be able to voice their opinions and concerns in the spirit of progress and problem solving, without fear of being placed in the firing line. This is where leaders can step in and offer conflict management. The HR department needs to offer services to help resolve pressing issues in a calm, relaxed space.

Take the following steps to begin to resolve conflict and eliminate conflict avoidance in your organisation.

1) Implement Frequent Manager Check-ins — Regular, authentic conversation can improve many aspects of work life. Importantly, it can also help in terms of conflict resolution. Managers should be encouraged to meet frequently with their employees, so staff get to know their leaders, develop familiarity and become more comfortable having difficult conversations. Implementation of regular check-ins and **coaching conversations** will help to create a culture of direct, fluid communication while demonstrating to everyone involved that their opinion is heard, respected and valued.

2) Give Your Employees Access to Communication Tools — Technology has changed the way we communicate in the workplace. It is also **helping give voice** to certain employees who might not feel comfortable speaking up in person. With team communication software such as Slack, employees can give themselves time to calmly and rationally frame an argument or an idea so that it comes off as constructive, not confrontational. This can help to build an open environment where contrary opinions are explored and shared.

3) Show Your Employees It Is Healthy to Debate and Disagree — It can take time to change company culture, but it's worth it in the long run. Help your employees reframe conflict as something constructive. We don't want conflict to be aggressive or unnecessarily confrontational, but debate and disagreement can be useful and beneficial for business. It can help if you demonstrate to your employees that management value variance of opinion. Employees should feel on solid ground and be secure in the knowl-

edge that if they stand up against an idea or process, they won't have to worry about their job.

Ultimately, companies should work towards minimising conflict through clarity and transparency. Organisations should develop clear company objectives and articulate the company's vision to their team members. This will help to get employees united, engaged and driven to accomplish it. When employees have a firm idea of what they are meant to do and the direction they are heading in, conflict becomes less ubiquitous, as everyone is working towards the same goal.