

Dealing with conflict

What causes conflict?

- **Misunderstanding:** If the supervisor and supervisee are at cross-purposes or if the supervisee has misunderstood issues that may affect upon their job, there is the potential for conflict.
- **Different Values and Beliefs:** The supervisee may hold different values, which may give rise to alternative interpretations about the direction the organisation or the job should be taking. At a more fundamental level, there may be conflicting approaches to how people should be treated in the supervision context. If these cannot be accommodated, they are going to be a constant source of antagonism in the relationship.
- **Different Interests:** A supervisor who is anxious to keep all costs down and does not want to incur additional costs and a supervisee who wants a significant salary increase to match what other advice workers are receiving locally will give rise to damaging conflict if the situation is not managed properly.
- **Interpersonal problems:** By far the most commonly quoted problem although it usually is a convenient symptom of one of the above.
- **Feelings and emotions:** When feelings are running high, people may behave in ways that they would not normally, and this can lead to conflict, sometimes through misunderstandings, or different values about the way in which people “should” behave in work situations.

What are the signs?

- Coolness or rigid formality
- Uncomfortable silences
- Unresolved issues returning to the agenda
- Avoidance of specific issues
- Constant reference to rules and procedures

Strategies for managing conflict

Evaluate the situation and assess its importance. The following are all legitimate strategies in the right situations:

- **Ignore**
- **Allow** the conflict to run its course
- **Contain** / reduce the conflict through (1) short term strategies of persuasion, coercion and arbitration or (2) medium term strategies of separation, mediation or confrontation.
- **Resolve** through establishing common goals, restructuring tasks, and improving communication
- **Prevent** i.e. building a climate of trust and collaboration

Behaviour in conflict situations

People react in different ways in conflict situations, and the same person may react differently in different situations and with different people:

- **Avoiding** the situation
- **Accommodating** what the other person wants at their expense
- **Compromising** "I'll meet you half way"
- **Competing** and trying to "win"
- **Collaborating** through working with the other person to reach a solution.

Stages in resolving conflict

1. Finding out from the parties involved in the conflict what the issues are as they see them, and how they would like it to be resolved.
2. Identifying what the common interests are in the situation, and what the issues behind a conflict are. Quite often people in a conflict become attached to a certain position, when there may be a number of different ways of resolving it.
3. Identifying the separate issues involved in a conflict where agreement must be reached.
4. Discussing each separate issue and agree a solution, making sure that the parties involved will implement a solution, even though they may not totally agree with it.
5. Agree when the situation will be reviewed.

Preventing conflict

It is preferable to prevent conflict from arising. That does not mean that people should not have differences, but when differences become conflict, it can be damaging to the individuals and the organisation.

Some of the following may help to prevent conflict:

- Emphasising team over individual goals, involving people in the planning and decision-making processes, and undertaking team-building activities.
- Establishing clear policies and procedures
- Ensure regular communication, through individual supervision and team meetings for example