

Conflict Resolution

Learn about the effects of unresolved conflict, ways to constructively resolve interpersonal conflict by negotiating solutions, and sources for assistance if internal resolution attempts fail.

RELEVANT LINKS:

I. Interpersonal conflict

Interpersonal conflicts occur from time to time in every organization even if there is no formal complaint. It is involved to one degree or another with almost every type of employment claim or grievance.

Early intervention and clear communication are two key factors in addressing interpersonal conflicts. It is also important to acknowledge emotional issues surrounding the conflict and ensure the way work duties are organized is not contributing to the problem. Generally, the best results are obtained when a solution is negotiated with all of the parties involved, rather than dictated from the top-down.

Unfortunately, some conflicts cannot be resolved and, in those cases, the goal may be to minimize the city's liability and any other "fallout" from the conflict.

If left unresolved, interpersonal conflicts can result in lower productivity, employee turnover, morale problems (gossip, backstabbing, e-mail wars, physical altercations, competing "camps" of employees) and sometimes lawsuits. In some situations, interpersonal conflict has resulted in the loss of key employees. Interpersonal conflict can also be associated with absenteeism, workers' compensation claims, and increased group health insurance costs. Employees who are involved in an interpersonal conflict may take "mental health" days off, be more likely to get injured at work, become clinically depressed or develop stress-related medical issues.

II. Constructively resolving conflict

There are many reasons why conflicts don't get resolved immediately:

- Incompatible interests (e.g. both parties want the same job assignment).
- A fundamental difference in values or a fundamental disagreement about "how" to resolve the conflict ("I'm the boss; therefore, I win").

RELEVANT LINKS:

- Different versions of the “truth” about the cause of the initial conflict (“You stole that job assignment from me” vs. “You dropped the ball on that assignment”).
- Both parties are too angry to speak constructively to each other.
- One or both parties deny responsibility for the conflict and expect a higher authority to resolve it by telling the other party he or she was wrong.
- Different views or desires about the nature of their relationship (e.g., “We’re basically ‘equals’.” vs. “I’m the boss”).

A. Recommendations for Resolving Conflict

How to resolve the conflict depends to some extent on your role. If you are in a position of authority (City Administrator, department supervisor, or elected official), it may be your responsibility to make sure conflicts are resolved so employees can get their work done. A co-worker who really is not involved in the conflict may have less of a role but can be key in setting a positive work environment. Regardless of your role, there are some basic methods and ideas that are common to most conflicts.

1. Acknowledge the emotions of the parties involved and address their fears

If a conflict occurs between the City Clerk and the Deputy Clerk over duties, there may be some emotional baggage needing to be addressed. The Clerk may fear the Council is thinking about forcing his/her out and giving the job to the Deputy Clerk. In this case, the Council may need to find a way to address the Clerk’s fear of losing his job before they can resolve the conflict.

2. Communicate clearly

Sometimes conflicts can be alleviated by clear communication. Consider a situation where the City Council doesn’t feel the Administrator is keeping them informed and the Administrator feels the Council is micro-managing. Clear communication about the expectations of both parties is crucial to resolving this type of conflict. Adopting policies or agreeing upon practices addressing how elected officials can get information from staff can support clear communication. Also, holding annual performance evaluations and quarterly “check-in” sessions provides scheduled opportunities for communication and may help resolve or avoid the conflict.

3. Allow the opportunity to be heard

Affording all the parties involved in a conflict the opportunity to express themselves is often key to de-escalating a situation and finding a way to resolution. Hearing others includes knowing yourself, clearing your mind of your own positions or assumptions, and intentionally being curious about the other person's perspective. Often this involves, asking clarifying discovery questions that open up the conversation.

Whether the conversation occurs in the context of a mediation session or in a private meeting, it is crucial to allow everyone the opportunity to express their perspective.

4. Identify positions and interests

When parties find themselves in conflict, they often take positions distinct from their underlying interests. A position often comes in the form of a demand to resolve an issue, such as a demand from a property owner to lower a tax assessment. The interest of the property owner might be simply a better understanding of the calculation of tax assessments or a payment plan that better fits his/her budget

5. Take action based on behavior

In all conflicts, there is a great temptation to react to the emotional component of the conflict.

However, it is important any official actions (e.g. discipline) taken by the city or its supervisors are based on the work-related behavior of the employees involved in the conflict, not on the thoughts, beliefs or feelings that they express.

An organization cannot control what people think and feel; it can only control what they do. If one employee states he/she dislikes a coworker, the city should probably not take action based on that statement alone. On the other hand, if the employee refuses to talk to the co-worker even when it is necessary to get job assignments completed, then the city can take action based on the refusal to communicate on work-related matters.

6. Intervene early

It is a very human tendency to want to minimize and ignore conflicts. However, this sometimes allows a conflict to fester and grow until it becomes unmanageable. As a guideline, it is better to address a small conflict directly and immediately.

7. Organize the workflow

While overlap of duties and cross-training is generally good for the organization, it may not always feel good or “comfortable” for the individual. Most of us feel secure when we have job duties unique to our position; this makes us feel “needed” by the organization. When others are given overlapping assignments or cross-trained in our jobs, we feel less secure and more expendable. Analyzing workflow and duties to determine ways to address “security needs” vs. the needs of the organization for back-up and cross-training may alleviate the source of some conflicts.

8. Reporting structures

Another related issue is unclear reporting structures. An employee who has to keep more than one boss happy is likely to run into conflicts when the bosses disagree with each other. This type of supervision is generally challenging and should probably be avoided unless necessary.

B. Integrated solutions

The possibilities regarding solutions vary greatly depending on the context of the dispute. Solutions may take the form of verbal agreements or written agreements, depending on the preferences of the involved parties, but should always accurately and completely reflect the intent of the parties. It is recommended all parties to a conflict contribute in some way to a solution as this helps ensure the durability of the agreement. There are generally four possible categories of outcome for a conflict

- Win/lose,
- Win/win.
- Compromise
- Integrated Solution

Win/lose outcomes are usually the least desirable as they will inevitably leave one or more parties dissatisfied. Win/win outcomes are the most desirable, but the least likely. More often than not, the best and most realistic resolution to a conflict involves some form of compromise by all parties to a conflict. Compromise where each party gives up some of their position moves the parties toward resolution but, in the long term, can still leave the parties feeling dissatisfied. Ideally, if each party approaches these conversations with curiosity and a desire to learn more about the other parties’ underlying interests, then often the parties, together, can reach a more collaborative and creative resolution.

The following are several ways to find a mutually acceptable solution.

RELEVANT LINKS:

Learn more about conflict resolution in: "The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice," Deutsch, Morton and Coleman, Peter T., Third Edition, 2014, Jossey-Bass, Inc, San Francisco, CA.

1. Expand the pie

Find ways to create more of the resource the parties are fighting over. For example, if two employees are having a conflict because both want to use the same funding to attend a conference, one way to resolve the conflict is to "expand the pie" by finding additional funds so both can attend.

2. Compensation

Find a way to compensate one of the parties for yielding on an issue. In the above conference-funding example, perhaps the employee who "yields" and lets the other employee attend the conference gets to attend their conference in the next fiscal year.

3. Goodwill-building

Each side concedes on issues of lesser importance to build goodwill, trust and agreement. In any conflict, there are usually a few issues of central importance and a few "kitchen sink" types of issues. If the two parties can find agreement on the smaller issues, it can build the foundation for agreement on the central issues. This can work well in negotiating a labor contract. For example, if health insurance contribution is a big source of disagreement, the two sides may be able to agree on smaller issues in order to build trust and goodwill. This may make it easier to tackle the health insurance contribution issue later.

4. Bridging

Create new options that satisfy critical underlying interests/needs. Consider a Councilmember who is at odds with the City Clerk. In this situation, the underlying issue may be the Councilmember's need for more information than the Clerk has been providing. The conflict may be resolved by requiring the Clerk to provide weekly updates to the City Council on various aspects of the city's management.

III. What if we've tried everything?

A. Minimizing liability

Some conflicts cannot be resolved or at least cannot be resolved given the amount of time, money or effort the city can afford to expend. In this case, the focus may switch from resolving the conflict to minimizing liability or other issues. If two employees cannot seem to work together despite the city's best efforts, the city may decide to establish "ground rules" for the employees' behavior towards each other and then closely supervise the interactions between the two employees to enforce those ground rules.

RELEVANT LINKS:

MN Dep't of Administration:
[Office of Collaboration and
Dispute Resolution.](#)

[Mediators and Everything
Mediation.](#)

[MediationNow.com](#)

Research@lmc.org
HRbenefits@lmc.org
800.925.1122
651.281.1200

Or, the city may rearrange work duties and assignments to minimize the interaction of the two employees. These “work-arounds” are not ideal and usually will not solve the problem in the long term, but at times may be the only realistic option available to the city.

Sometimes, the only answer to an interpersonal conflict involves removing one party from the workplace. Determining how to do this and when it is appropriate probably should not be attempted without substantial legal advice and input.

B. Mediation

“Inside” mediators are those affiliated with the city. “Outside” mediators are those not affiliated with the city. Cities should conduct reference checks and investigate all sources thoroughly before hiring or using an outside mediator. The following are some places to look for mediation help. These sources are provided only as ideas or places to start.

- Human Resources Department staff.
- City Attorney.
- Upper Level Management.
- City Councilmember.
- Co-workers.
- League of Minnesota Cities.
- Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- National on-line listing of mediators.
- Yellow Pages under “Mediation.”
- On-line mediation services.
- Law firms.
- Local colleges/universities.
- Local churches/religious organizations.
- Not-for-profit organizations.
- Teambuilding & Conflict Management Consultants.

IV. Further Assistance

For assistance with conflict resolution questions you may also contact the League’s Research Department or Human Resources and Benefits Department.