

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

Total Talent Management

# Conflict Resolution – Creating a Mutual Understanding

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***BE BOUNDLESS***



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# Creating a Mutual Understanding



There is an old story about two girls arguing over an orange. They both wanted this single orange to themselves. They argued for hours over who should get it and why. Finally, though, they realized that they could both win: one wanted the rind for a cake, while the other one wanted to make juice from the inside of the orange.

This model of win-win situations and mutual gain is our preferred outcome for any conflict. In this module, we will explore how creating mutual understanding can lay the groundwork for a win-win solution.

## What Do I Want?

To begin, identify what you personally want out of the conflict. Try to state this positively.

Examples:

- I want a fair share of all new customers.
- I want a better working relationship with my manager.
- I want changes to the schedule.

You can create two versions of your personal needs statement: your ideal resolution and your realistic resolution. Alternatively, you could frame your statement into several steps if the conflict is complicated.

Another useful exercise is to break down your statement into wants and needs. This is particularly valuable if your statement is vague. Let's take the statement, "I want changes to the schedule," as an example.

Want	Need
More input into the scheduling process	To work less than 30 hours per week
A more regular schedule	More notice for schedule changes

This will give you some bargaining room during the conflict resolution process, and will help ensure that you get what you need out of the solution. In the example above, you may be willing to give up a more regular schedule if more notice for schedule changes is provided.

## What Do They Want?

Next, identify what the person that you are in conflict with wants. Try to frame this positively. Explore all the angles to maximize your possibilities for mutual gain. These framing questions will help you start the process.

- What does my opponent need?
- What does my opponent want?
- What is most important to them?
- What is least important to them?



## What Do We Want?



Now that you have identified the wants and needs of both sides, look for areas of overlap. These will be the starting points for establishing mutual ground.

Here is an example. Joe and George are in conflict over the current schedule. As the most senior members of the assembly line team, they both alternate their regular duties with that of supervisor. Although taking on the responsibility gives the supervisor an extra \$250 per shift, the supervisor also has to work an extra hour per shift, and has additional safety responsibilities.

Joe and George both work Monday to Friday, and as a regular assembly line team member, their shifts are from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. As supervisor, they are expected to work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

	<b>Joe</b>	<b>George</b>
<b>Wants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To have at least two supervisor shifts per week.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To have at least two supervisor shifts per week.</li> <li>To leave by 4:30 p.m. on Fridays.</li> </ul>
<b>Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To leave by 4:30 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays to pick up his children.</li> <li>To ensure that the foreman position is covered by someone from Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not to have more than three supervisor shifts per week as it will require him to pay extra taxes.</li> <li>To ensure that the foreman position is covered by someone from Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.</li> </ul>

From this simple chart, we can see that Joe and George have the same goal: to ensure that the supervisor position is covered by someone during regular working hours. Thus, this is a logistical conflict rather than an emotional one. We can also see from the chart that there seems to be some good starting ground for a solution.

When working through the wants and needs of both parties, be careful not to jump to conclusions. Rather, be on the lookout for the root cause. Often, the problem is not what it seems.

# Focusing on Individual and Shared Needs



So far, we have talked about laying the foundation for common ground, one of the key building blocks for win-win solutions. This module will look at some techniques on building common ground and using it to create partnerships.

It may not seem like we have progressed very far in resolving the conflict. Indeed, most of these primary steps are focused on information gathering and problem solving. For minor conflicts, having these steps in your toolbox will simply help you keep all possibilities in mind during the conflict. For major conflicts, these steps will help you ensure you achieve the best solution possible for the situation.

## Finding Common Ground



We have already talked about finding common ground when exploring each side's wants and needs. With these tools, you should be able to find common ground even before the conflict begins.

In our earlier example, with Joe and George in conflict over the supervisor schedule, they both wanted to ensure that the position was covered during their hours of responsibility. Other possible areas of common ground could include ensuring the safety of the assembly line team, continuing to work with each other, or continuing to work for the company. Try hard enough and you'll find something in common!

You should continue to try to find common ground throughout the entire conflict resolution process. It will help you understand your adversary's position and better position you to help create a win-win solution. These positive gestures will build goodwill, and help you make the shift from being two people in conflict to being two people working to solve a problem.

Some examples:

- "I think the company needs a more unified sales team, too."
- "I would really like us to win first place this year, too."
- "I agree that we can get this conflict resolved and build a better widget."

## Building Positive Energy and Goodwill

There are often many negative emotions associated with conflict. No wonder – conflict makes many people upset and anxious, and often results in negative feelings like anger and disappointment.

If you are able to turn that negative energy into positive energy to help build goodwill with the person that you are in conflict with, resolving the conflict will be much easier. Ironically, the more negative the situation, the more important this step is.

Let's say that the person that you are in conflict with is very angry with you. Although they have agreed that they want to resolve the conflict, they are cool towards you and putting in minimum effort towards resolving the problem.

You may think, "Why should I bother?" This is a very important question indeed. How much energy and time are you will to spend on this conflict? Is it worth resolving? (We will explore these questions more in the next module.)

Consider, however, the power that your approach has. You have two basic options: to match your adversary's demeanor, or to be a positive influence. Both will likely take as much energy, but which will yield greater results?

Here are some ways to build positive energy.

- Have a good attitude. The preparation steps we discussed earlier should help you identify the positive things that will come out of this conflict. Try to focus on these things instead of the negative aspects of the conflict.
- Frame things positively.
- Create actionable items.
- Try to keep emotions out of your statements. State feelings and opinions in as objective a manner as possible. Label your thoughts as thoughts by starting sentences with, "I think..."
- Take a break when you need it.
- If you say, "I see where you're coming from," make sure you mean it. If you can't see where they are coming from, ask them to tell you more. Often, sharing information can break down even the toughest person's defenses.
- Invite the other person to step into your shoes. Tell them a story, outline consequences, and explain how you feel in an objective manner. Share as much information as you can.



## Strengthening Your Partnership

Making the transition from opponents to problem-solving teammates is one of the most powerful conflict resolution tools. We have already discussed ways to build common ground to help bridge the gap between you and the person having the conflict. These tools are a great start, but there are some additional things that you can do to maintain and strengthen that partnership.

In 1965, Bruce Tuckman, developed a four-stage model showing how teams grow and develop. This model can be applied to one-on-one human interactions, too.

Stage	Explanation	What You Can Do to Help
<b>Forming</b>	Team members are just meeting, unsure of their role and themselves.	Encourage team building through non-conflict laden tasks and activities. Involve the team in task planning and goal setting.
<b>Storming</b>	Team members discover differences and butt heads; conflict can interfere with progress.	Continue with the plan; evaluate and adjust as necessary. Support the team through conflict and help them resolve it.
<b>Norming</b>	Team members start to discover similarities too. Performance typically improves, but social interaction may also cause it to drop.	Keep the group focused on the goal; encourage social activities outside of team time.
<b>Performing</b>	Team members are now comfortable with each other and work together well.	Continue to offer resources and support to the team. Monitor performance, as teams can change stages at any time (particularly when members join in or drop out).

## Further Study

To learn more about conflict resolution look for additional mini-toolkits and consider our in-person offerings such as, [Conflict Management](#), [Conflict Resolution skills for Healthcare Professionals](#) and [Difficult People and Difficult Behavior: Tips, Tactics, and Tools](#). Further trainings to develop Individual Excellence will be shared here in the Leadership Café, on all of the competencies found in our [Competency Guide](#). Subscribe now to [The Learning Lab](#), an online platform featuring Business Skills & Productivity, Leadership Development, and Office 365, powered by Skillsoft Percipio and customized for UW learners.