



5 ways you may be totally mismanaging conflict—and what to do instead

“Because most people are conflict-averse ... [i]f you handle difficult conflict- and stress-filled situations effectively, you have an advantage,” writes Stanford professor Jeffrey Pfeffer in [Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't](#).

Want to join the rare few who have mastered the messy art of conflict management? Start by avoiding these common pitfalls.



1. Failing to determine whether a conflict is “hot” or “cold” and calibrate your response accordingly.

Professional mediator [Mark Gerzon](#) provides a simple but potent approach to conflict response: Determine whether the conflict is “hot” (red faces, F-bombs, raised voices, arm-waving) or “cold” (pursed lips, silence, averted eyes, physically turning away), then do what it takes to get the situation to “warm,” which is usually a more productive temperature for discussing disagreements and solving interpersonal problems.

For example, if you know you tend to run hot, you can make it a habit to politely remove yourself from incendiary situations until you've cooled off:

“I have strong opinions on this but need to think it over—can I get back to you later today?”

Or if a direct report of yours shuts down in a 1-on-1 and starts responding with one-word answers and crossed arms, instead of ignoring the situation you might proactively try to warm things up:

“Suki, it seems like you're not very receptive to what I'm saying. If you have a different view, I'd like to hear it. Could you share what's on your mind?”

And don't forget about another important—and often overlooked—factor that might affect a conflict's temperature: power dynamics. For example, it may be more common for direct reports to exhibit cold behaviors, simply because many people are unwilling to openly confront “the boss” (i.e., you). This doesn't make the situation any less urgent than a hot conflict.

2. Hiding behind traits like “nice,” “positive” or “team player”—when you're really just conflict-averse.

Is it really all that nice to suppress your opinions to the extent that you never challenge false—and potentially damaging—assumptions? How positive do you think colleagues feel when you ignore or downplay their problems? And do people who always agree with everyone else provide enough value to be called team players?



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mistakes 3–5 for more on this).

So how far should you go in initiating and engaging in constructive conflict? There's no easy answer—it will really depend on each situation that crops up. But here are a few key factors to consider:

- *The stakes.*
How much do you think the issue matters to your customers, company and/or team? What about to you—would not speaking up go against a deeply held value of yours, or is the issue relatively minor?
- *The colleagues involved.*
How conflict-averse (or prone) are they? How stressed out? What kinds of [cultural factors around power dynamics](#) might be influencing them? How much (or how little) political capital do you have to burn with them?
- *Your team and organization's culture around conflict.*
How does your team typically handle conflict, and what are the results? What kind of [feedback culture](#) have you created? And if the conflict involves [managing up](#), how hierarchical is your company in general (e.g., is it considered rude to question those with larger job titles than yours)?

3. Trying to prove yourself right instead of understand the situation.

It's normal to enjoy being right. It's also rarely productive, because there are very few situations in which one person is completely right and the other is completely wrong. Conflicts are typically more complex than that. Plus, insisting on showing how much smarter you are than others won't win you many allies.

Instead of approaching conflicts as an opportunity to score points, try approaching them as an opportunity to learn more about the situation and colleagues involved. Here are a few ways to do that:

- *Ask questions that show you want the best solution, not necessarily your solution.* Let's say an engineering manager wants to add a product feature you've heard customers don't want. Instead of snarkily asking, “So you're just going to ignore our customers?” you might genuinely posit in a curious tone of voice, “How do you think our customers will respond to that feature?” Maybe the engineering manager has some customer data you haven't seen that could change your perspective. For more, see our tip [When you disagree with others, ask, “Could you help me understand?”](#)
- *Keep your tone of voice and body language warm.*
A non-accusatory tone, relaxed arms and jaw, and informal demeanor can go a long way toward signaling your desire to understand others' perspectives. For more, see our tip [Practice using open body language](#).
- *Use “and” instead of “but.”*
Who knew that a tiny word could make such a big difference? But it does. (Whoops.) “But” is the linguistic equivalent of shutting the door in someone's face, while “and” indicates you believe multiple opinions can coexist. For example, instead of “*But what about Project X—will we have time for it if we also do Project Y?*” you might say, “*You need to get Project Y done, and I'm concerned about Project X. What are our options?*”

4. Making work-related disagreements personal.

Most conflicts are about the situation—not anything personal. Still, many of us can't help ourselves. Just as we sometimes mistakenly assume that someone who disagrees with us doesn't like or respect us, we're inclined to find fault with the other person's character instead of focusing on the substance and context of their disagreement.

Author and leadership expert Liane Davey explains it this way: Our survival instinct means we're hard-wired to jump to quick, fight-or-flight conclusions that often result in “attribut[ing] problems or mistakes others make to their capability or character, rather than to the

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with compassion instead of rancor.

- Poor: *“How could you think that?”*
- Better: *“That’s a line of thinking I hadn’t considered. Could you tell me a little more?”*

For more suggestions, see our tool [10 things to say when you disagree](#).

5. Distancing yourself from people you often disagree with.

Abraham Lincoln once famously remarked, “I don’t like that man. I must get to know him better.” Kind of a strange thing to say, right? Not if you want to broaden your perspective and learn more about your own blind spots and biases. Plus, spending more time with someone you dislike and/or frequently disagree with can lead to a really exciting (and really ironic) outcome: Getting to know each other may cause you to feel more open and empathetic, turning uncomfortable clashes into spirited, potentially illuminating exchanges.

How can you start bridging the gap? Rather than avoiding the “disagreeable” person, go out of your way to say hello and good-bye, make small talk and—probably the most effective step you can take—[ask for the person’s assistance](#) and input. These kinds of overtures indicate respect and can help get you on the path to a healthier relationship.

For more, check out our article [Must work well with someone I dislike](#). And if you’re seeking more general guidance on conflict, explore our [Conflict Management](#) topic.

Note: This article doesn’t cover illegal behaviors related to conflict, such as discrimination and harassment. See HR immediately if you’re dealing with something that serious, or if you have questions or concerns about your legal responsibilities as a manager.

