



Conflict with Direct Reports Is a Special Case

Conflict at work can arise for many different reasons between you and your boss, you and your peers, and you and your direct reports – in short, between any two or more people who may not share the same vision, personality, tactics, or culture. But conflict between you and a direct report is a special case that highlights two particular areas. One, it brings into play the working relationship between you and your direct report and affects how that relationship is built, maintained, and managed to achieve results. Two, it affects the work itself – the management of tasks and the strategies for achieving goals for which you and your direct report share responsibility. In either case it's important for you to see both sides of the conflict.

Managing the Relationship

Business media talk a lot about empowered workers, flat organizations, and new networked ways of doing business, but the primary organizational relationship is still manager to direct report. New managers, riding a wave of success in having achieved results on their own merits, often find it difficult to make the shift from a top-performing individual contributor to a role in which they direct others to get results. Balancing the technical skills that brought them to a management position with the interpersonal skills that such a position demands can take some time to master.

The relationship between manager and direct report is one of the few relationships in which clear position power is still at play in organizations, and you should always consider the dynamics of that relationship during a conflict situation. As you work to see both sides of a conflict, ask yourself if you want or need your direct reports to demonstrate a certain degree of compliance (to meet the

basic requirements of the task), or whether you need their commitment (to show a willingness to go beyond the basics) to achieve the results the organization expects. In organizations that rely on a hierarchical order, a direct report's compliance is often all that a manager expects and needs. More contemporary, networked organizations often require commitment beyond compliance because carrying out any more than the most basic, short-term tasks is otherwise nearly impossible to sustain.

Managing the Work

Conflict can occur when your direct report is working below your expectations or is having difficulty adapting to unfamiliar assignments. Many managers mistakenly think that a direct report who is excellent at doing many tasks is able to execute all tasks. The flip side to that thinking characterizes a direct report who does not execute some tasks well as being unable to carry out any task at all. Managers with that perspective are prone to micromanaging and are reluctant to delegate responsibilities. Typically, such managers delegate a task, but when the result doesn't meet their expectations they take it back and do it themselves. As a result, these managers take on more work and lose confidence in the direct report's abilities. It also discourages the direct report, who can lose confidence and perform below expectations.

To avoid conflict from arising in these kinds of situations, it's important that you are very clear on your expectations and the results you're looking for. At the same time, be flexible enough to allow your direct reports some leeway in getting those results. Try to see the task from their point of view and to appreciate their approach to carrying out the work. It might not be the way you would do it, but if the results meet your expectations, step back and offer recognition instead of managing the work for them and possibly starting conflict.