



Seven Steps toward Managing Conflict

CCL has found a seven-step process valuable in helping managers and executives become more strategic about managing conflict. This process is similar to other problem-solving models, but it emphasizes the importance of self-exploration and discovery as part of the process. CCL often describes conflict as a problem wrapped in emotion. There's a direct link between what we feel and what we think, and both of these aspects affect conflict situations. Often people use words like "emotional" and "rational" to describe these two aspects as if they were the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of conflict. But what seem like polar opposites actually represent the paradox of managing conflict – it's not about managing just one or the other but about how to manage both the emotional (feeling) and rational (thinking) aspects of conflict. Awareness of both perspectives gives you a more complete view of the conflict situation.

1. **Build personal awareness.** Boosting your awareness helps you to understand why you think/feel the way you do when reacting to a conflict situation. Focus your awareness along two lines. First, be aware of the immediate thought and/or feeling you have in response to an external action or situation (trigger) that causes you to act as if you were in conflict. Second, clarify and be aware of the actions and reactions (coping strategies) you use to avoid dealing with conflict.
2. **Clarify your conflict view.** Examine your own perception of the conflict. Explore your underlying assumptions regarding your beliefs about the situation. Align your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors with the reality of the situation. Address these five components to prepare for the next step:

- *Who* – identify with whom you are in conflict.
 - *What* – identify the source of the conflict.
 - *When* – choose a date for meeting the person with whom you are experiencing conflict.
 - *Where* – identify a neutral, nonthreatening location for the meeting.
 - *Why* – remind yourself that what you hope to gain from the meeting isn't a victory but a mutually beneficial solution to the conflict.
3. **Understand the perspective of others.** The capacity to see things from another point of view is essential to managing conflict successfully. To reach this understanding, first manage your own emotions. Then, have a conversation with your boss to obtain his or her point of view. There are three components to understanding the perspective of others: suspend judgment, ask questions to enlarge your perspective, and validate the perspective of others.
 4. **Brainstorm solutions.** Look for common ground. Have a discussion with your boss. Establish rapport, express yourself honestly and openly, be specific, and ask for feedback. If conflict arises from differences in values or ideas, finding common ground – even agreeing to disagree – can break the tension of the conflict cycle. If the conflict is related to a task, multiple solutions may be possible.
 5. **Create an action plan.** Make a plan to address the issues you uncovered in step 4. Discuss your action plan with your boss and solicit feedback.
 6. **Implement your action plan.** Update your boss on your progress according to the plan you developed and discussed in step 5.

7. **Evaluate your action plan.** To learn how to better manage conflict in the future, review each conflict experience you have and record what worked and what did not in managing the conflict situation. Keeping a personal learning journal can aid you in this process.

There is likely to always be conflict between managers and their bosses. It's almost impossible to avoid, given human nature and the pressures of organizational life. But conflict can be managed so that it's a positive encounter that leaves both sides creatively involved in their work, eager to insert and support their ideas. Conflict, when handled right, can help to create a workplace that is rewarding and invigorating.