



Be a **MODERN MANAGER** with a thriving team.

episode guide

EPISODE 166

Engage in Healthy, Productive Conflict

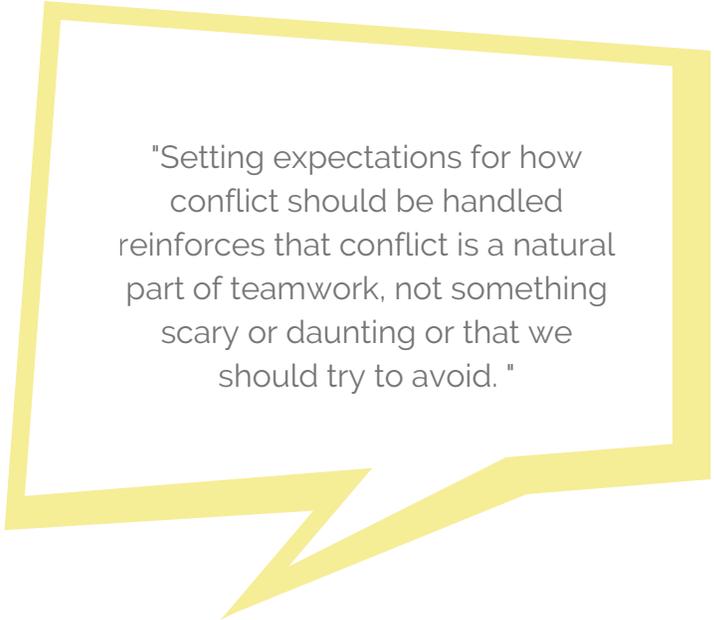
Every team experiences conflict at some point. Therefore, the question is not if or when, but how the conflict will unfold. Managers play an essential role in guiding the team's ability to engage in healthy, productive conflict so that the team gets stronger and the work is better.

This guide includes the healthy/unhealthy and productive/unproductive frameworks, tips for developing norms to help your team engage in healthy, productive conflict, and sample norms to get you started.

THE CONTENT AND THE PROCESS

Every conflict consists of the content and the process. Effective teams know both (1) what conflicts are worth engaging in and (2) how to engage in the conflict in ways that promote trust and respect.

These dimensions are referred to as the productivity and health of the conflict.



"Setting expectations for how conflict should be handled reinforces that conflict is a natural part of teamwork, not something scary or daunting or that we should try to avoid."



PRODUCTIVE - UNPRODUCTIVE CONFLICT

The level of productivity of a conflict measures how useful the conflict is to the team and the work. Some conflicts, despite being uncomfortable, strengthen the team's ability to deliver results while other conflicts suck up energy and delay the work without material benefits.

Use the frame below to help gauge the productivity of a conflict.



Productive:

- Makes the team smarter
- Improves outcomes

Examples:

- Wrestling with diverse perspectives
- Working through different options
- Balancing competing priorities
- Dealing with ambiguity
- Resolving an ongoing tension

Unproductive:

- Distracts from the work
- Minimal if any value added

Examples:

- Quibbling over the past
- Harping on trivial matters
- Fixating on minor details
- Revisiting old decisions
- Differences of style

If you notice unproductive conflict:

- Ask the group how resolving this conflict will help achieve the collective goal.
- Acknowledge that there is tension, but offer that this may not be the most important conversation to have right now.
- Talk with team members individually about their concerns and help put them in context of the larger teamwork.
- Shift the focus from the past to the future or what we've learned that can help us do better.
- Dig into the underlying values, perspectives, and concerns that are driving the conflict and aim to resolve those rather than the surface issue.



HEALTHY - UNHEALTHY APPROACH TO CONFLICT

(Un)healthy conflict measures the impact of the process on the people involved in the conflict. Regardless of the outcome, some processes are grounded in respect and ultimately strengthen relationships while others deteriorate them.

Use the frame below to help gauge the health of an approach to resolving the conflict.



Healthy:

- Addresses the conflict straight on
- Treats each person with respect
- Grounded in trust and psychological safety
- Openness to explore

Example Behaviors:

- Raises an issue with the right people
- Listens actively, seeks understanding
- Shares the "what" and the "why"
- Works toward the goal, not winning
- Recognizes and manages emotions

Unhealthy:

- Avoids the conflict
- Subverts the process
- Enter with ill will/disrespect
- Unwilling to be moved
- Acts out of emotion

Examples Behaviors:

- Doesn't take responsibility
- Complains to others not involved
- Doesn't share honest views
- Tries to win at all costs

"Emotions are an important part of being human but when we let our emotions run high, they can increase the intensity of the conflict and decrease our collective ability to really listen to each other."

If you notice an unhealthy approach to conflict:

- Acknowledge that the process isn't working.
- Set ground rules for how the people involved will behave.
- Outline a process that will guide the people involved through the discussion.
- Seek a common goal. Aim to identify a shared vision that everyone is aiming for.
- Take a break to allow people time to process their emotions, new information, etc.



ESTABLISH GROUND RULES FOR CONFLICT

Establishing norms and expectations for how to deal with conflict is one way teams can proactively support productive and healthy conflict. While it's not a magical fix, reinforcing that conflict is expected, that we want to put conflicts on the table so they can be resolved, and that we'll treat each other with respect when dealing with conflict, is quite powerful. Simple norms can clarify the expected behaviors so people feel more confident and comfortable when addressing conflict.

AGREE ON TEAM NORMS

If you don't already have team norms or ground rules, start by introducing the concept and sharing your goal of making it easier for your team to deal with conflicts when they arise. Then gather your team and use the following process to develop shared expectations.

1. Discuss Productive/Unproductive and Healthy/Unhealthy Conflict

When your team understands the elements of productive, healthy conflict, they can stop themselves from getting side tracked or too heated, and notice if there's a lack of respect in the conversation. Empower your team to know how to call out unhealthy and unproductive conflict by establishing these shared definitions and models.

2. Envision what a successful conflict experience looks and feels like

How does your team hope to deal with conflict? What values are shaping the experience? What are the goals of a conflict management process (e.g. efficiency, everyone feels heard, better work product, etc). Be as specific and descriptive as possible.

3. Brainstorm norms that support the vision

Using the vision, explore what behaviors you would expect to see (or not). It often helps to reflect on past experiences (both with this team and from outside of this work context as well). When you've successfully navigated conflict in the past, what helped? If you've been part of frustrating conflicts, what got in the way? Use the list of norms in this guide to help spur thinking.

4. Prioritize the 3-5 most important norms

From your brainstormed list of ideal conflict behaviors, choose three to five that are your team's top choices. Choosing too many makes them hard to remember and apply. Focus on the few that are likely to make the biggest impact. Some teams find it useful to have 1-2 norms in each of the categories so that the full conflict process is covered.



5. Make the norms visible

Selecting the norms is a solid starting point but they must also be regularly infused into the team's psyche. This can happen by posting them on a wall, creating a digital wallpaper, or pinning them as a chat in Slack. Refer to the norms whenever a conflict shows up to help ground the people involved.

6. Identify skills your team needs

Sometimes in order to uphold the norms, individuals or the team need to develop skills and competencies. Does your team need better psychological safety and trust to engage in conflict? Could someone benefit from improved communication or better regulation of their emotions? Figure out what skills are useful to reaching a healthier place of dealing with conflict. Incorporate this development work into the person or team's growth goals.

SAMPLE GROUND RULES

Addressing Conflict:

- Speak up if you disagree or have an alternative perspective.
- Address conflict head on by raising issues in a timely manner.
- Do your best to resolve conflicts on your own, and if you get stuck, bring it to the manager.
- Clarify what the conflict is about.
- Ensure the right people are in the conversation.
- Clarify what success looks like before diving into the issue. Seek shared goals and values.
- Point out if you notice an unproductive or unhealthy conflict.

Engaging Respectfully:

- Avoid pointing fingers and placing blame.
- Work in good faith to resolve the conflict.
- Treat each other with respect.
- Speak honestly and share both the 'what' and the 'why' of your thinking.
- No venting, arguing, or unproductive monologues. Use other venues to decompress.
- Take responsibility for your behavior. Don't be defensive.
- Listen to others and seek understanding. Ask questions for clarification.
- Acknowledge when someone has hurt or disrespected you - give them the benefit of learning.
- Own it when you've (un)intentionally hurt or disrespected someone - give them the benefit of an authentic apology.
- Show up and be fully present.



Increasing Self-awareness:

- Be willing to compromise or shift your position.
- Reflect on your own ideas, perspectives, positions, values, emotions, etc, to better understand them.
- Consider what's best for the team as well as what's best for each individual.
- Be willing to let unproductive conflicts go.
- Ask yourself and others: What story am I telling myself about this situation?
- Separate fact from opinion.
- Use I statements and avoid generalizations.
- Look for assumptions made such as:
 - I spoke my piece and therefore everyone understands me.
 - The other person spoke and therefore I know everything I need to know.
 - My outlook is how everyone sees things / My outlook is how everyone should see things.
 - My reaction or interpretation is appropriate and accurate, and shared by others.

Managing the Process:

- Request a break to process emotions and/or new information, or any time it's helpful.
- Look for root causes.
- Focus on future fixes not shoulda, woulda, coulda.
- Acknowledge emotions and explore their source e.g. behavior - impact - emotion.
- Before sharing your own concerns, reflect back what you heard the other person say to ensure accurate understanding.
- When things are feeling stuck, bring in a third party to help mediate.
- If a third party is mediating, agree on the role the mediator will play.
- Acknowledge power differences. Consider if power or authority may be inhibiting the process and look for alternative approaches.
- Ask what other information or people are needed to help resolve the conflict?