



When there is a true conflict between co-workers in a small business the results can be disastrous. Often, the conflict cannot easily be boiled down to one situation and grows over time, especially in environments where it's not addressed immediately. It's not unusual for something that happened YEARS ago to influence day to day activities in a business TODAY.

The good news is that it can be different. Relationships CAN be mended; in fact they can be stronger than what they are today. If you're reading this right now and thinking it's not possible, we respectfully ask you to examine your own mindset when it comes to solving this issue. We know it won't be easy. In fact, in order to get past a conflict, you are often forced to reflect very carefully on your own part in the conflict. It requires that you are willing to challenge your own assumptions, thoughts, and way of thinking. If your immediate thought is, “but it's not me, it's them,” you will miss a great opportunity to fix the conflict.

The brutal truth about conflict is that there's no one “truth” and that everyone involved in the conflict contributes to the conflict in some way, shape or form. If you're here to drag up the past or seek some sense of “I'm right” then this simply will not work. Conflict resolution must begin with you. You must be willing to participate in an open and honest conversation that might ask you to take a hard look at your way of thinking. If you're not willing to do this, you will just go through the motions and results will suffer. As you work through the conflict here are a few tips to approach the situation with a mindset that will allow a successful resolution.

**Be 100% clear on the Result** - We've discussed being an advocate of the result, but it's important that every party is clear on what result the business needs to achieve. A lot of time can be wasted discussing what ifs, what happened in the past, and blame. It's easy to focus on the negative, if you're not sure what you are working towards. Focus on the result. Focus on what the business needs. If there's a disagreement in the result, you've got your first conflict to solve. Remember that the result isn't always about you and your feelings, but what the business needs to be successful. We want to work toward a winning situation where the business and everyone in the business is working toward a result that they agree with, but in all cases the absolute win has to be that the business is getting the result it needs to be successful.

**Understand Your Own Lens** - It's important to understand that we all make judgments and it is a natural reaction to judge what you are hearing, especially when emotions are high. What we ask of you isn't always easy, but we challenge you to understand that when you listen you are listening from your own lens. That lens is made up of life experiences, your education, past experiences with the people involved in the conflict, assumptions, and so much more. When we listen from our own lens we hear things *differently* than others. It's not right or wrong, but it is different. We can literally listen to the same sentence, by the same speaker, with the same tone and pace, at the exact same time and walk away with different interpretations. You might think a speaker is direct and in charge, where as someone else hears it as overbearing because it sounds like a professor they disliked in their past. You might hear something and not hear any malice in the words, but someone else who had a bad experience with the speaker hears that same sentence and based on that previous experience reads more into what was said.

We need to caution you to check your way of thinking again. If you've read this paragraph and think, “Yes, that's their problem with me” then you need to reread this paragraph and identify your own lens. Be aware of your own way of

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thinking and the assumptions you are making when you are listening to someone. Be willing to challenge those assumptions and the intention that you hear in words that are being communicated. Be willing to ask: “Do I feel offended?” “Do I feel something negative?” “Am I feeling defensive?” If you’re evaluating something ask the communicator to explore the topic with you to ensure you understand what they are intending to communicate, not what you hear.

**Let Go of “Right” and “Wrong”** – If you’re constantly listening to what someone is saying with the intention of finding them right or wrong then you are not truly listening to them. You are listening to judge, to find fault, and to win an argument. This is a great stance, for a debate, but not for solving a conflict. Be willing to be humble and let go of right and wrong. It’s not about a personal win for you; it’s about solving the problem at hand.

In addition, it’s vital to note that you can be 100% right and still be contributing to the conflict. In conflict resolution there is only one way to judge success: It’s not about who wins or who is right, it’s about did we reach the results. Be very aware that if you’re clinging to right, wrong, or a personal win then you’re not focused on the needed result.

**Be Aware of Language** - It’s important to be aware of your own language. Obviously, you want to avoid name calling and unprofessional language, but there’s more to language. Be aware of how you phrase statements. It’s very easy to put someone on the defensive and make them feel like they have to defend their answers. It’s also easy to offend someone, even when you truly don’t mean to do so. Think of your language not just from your own lens, but from other’s as well.

Being aware of language also means understanding how YOU react to the language that is being used. Words can be offensive, but you have to give them permission to offend you. This was discussed earlier, but if you’re having a reaction to language being used you need to explore your own lens. Are you really reacting to what the communicator is trying to say? Or, are you reacting to a past experience? Or, are you reading into what you think they are trying to say? Challenge your own thinking and when in doubt ask.

Remember that being aware of language isn’t just words. It should include tone, pace, and even body language.

**Stick to Facts** - If you want to solve a conflict you have to move past emotion and vague descriptions of what has happened in the past. You need clear objective facts. Take time before your discussion to gather objective facts. Write down clear examples that you want to share that are relevant to the conflict. If you find yourself talking about vague examples of when something happens realize that it will be hard for anyone else in the conflict to address your concerns.

We carefully chose the words, “Objective facts” above, because not all facts are objective. You should clearly state what you observe, but don’t make your feelings or emotions stand as fact. There is a difference between, “You were angry” and “Based on your tone of voice in that meeting, I thought you sounded angry. Can we talk about that?” The first can create a defensive confrontation and the other can open a thoughtful conversation. The true fact is that you felt something that may or may not be true, which is that they were angry. It can and should be addressed, but accepting it as a fact means that you’re only looking at it from your own lens.



It's important to note that sometimes facts can be used in a negative manner. If you're using the facts as a battering ram or see them as a collection of weapons to “win” the conversation, we challenge you to think about your approach. It means that you haven't stepped outside your own lens and we can guarantee if you're looking for facts to win your case, you can always find them. However, if you choose to withhold the principles set forth in this document you'll begin to understand you can always choose how you react to a situation. Don't react to facts by making them negative. They are not the end point, but the beginning of a conversation to focus back on the result that needs to be achieved. Use them to move forward productively and force yourself to recognize when your own way of thinking needs to be challenged.

**Re-contract** - One last thing. When you leave the conflict resolution, you must be willing to start over or re-contract. The past can and often should be discussed when it provides necessary facts, and examples of what should be solved, but once that's been done, it's over. This doesn't mean that you immediately forget past incidents, but that you are willing to look at the future through a new lens and try to reach an understanding.

This won't happen immediately. You will need to challenge your own assumptions and ways of thinking. It's perfectly natural to feel weary and maybe even a bit doubtful about this in the beginning. We're not asking you to take on an overly optimistic attitude and overlook any barriers. In fact, you should absolutely be prepared that it won't be all roses and sunshine. This will take work from everyone involved and no one is perfect. If you're waiting for that one slip up, those first stumbles, then you're not really willing to solve the conflict. Instead, try approaching this with the knowledge that there will be bumps in the road, but if you deal with them immediately using the same approach as we've outlined in this document, the issue won't be as big. Don't give the conflict the chance to grow. Don't set yourself or anyone else up for failure. Do decide to be a problem-solver who is willing to have tough conversations and work together toward an agreed upon result.