

Learner guide

Manage conflict

SITXCOM005



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Please note the following condition

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Overview

Think about the times you have had disagreements with other people. Chances are you've been in situations in both your personal and working life that have led to misunderstandings and conflict.

Dealing with conflict is a normal and inevitable part of life. People will have conflicting ideas, opinions and personalities. In fact, a certain level of conflict is good!

Conflict isn't something that needs to be avoided. If dealt with effectively, it can have a positive outcome.

It is a real skill to be able to handle conflict effectively, something of benefit both professionally and personally.

Think about how developing conflict resolution techniques and strategies and improving your communication skills could benefit you.

Let's look at what you will learn on completion of this unit.

Section 1: Identify conflict situations

Section 2: Resolve conflict

Section 3: Evaluate conflict resolution

1 Section 1: Identify conflict situations

On completion of this section you will learn the following.

- How to identify potential for conflict and take action to prevent escalation.
- How to identify situations where personal safety of customers or colleagues may be threatened and organise appropriate assistance.
- How to identify and use resources to assist in managing conflict.

Meet the expert

For the purpose of this unit, we need to have a common understanding of what conflict is. A conflict management consultant can give some expert advice.



Watch the video to find out more.

'Hi, I'm Zoe and I'm a conflict management consultant and I'm going to work with you throughout this unit. Let's start by defining conflict.

Conflict is a disagreement between two individuals, or within a group or team about people's expectations or goals.

Conflict, when handled appropriately, can promote the following.

- Improved working relationships
- Improved customer service
- Increased productivity
- Increased opportunities for personal and professional development

There are many types of conflict situations and causes. Let's look at the different categories on the next screen.'

Categories of conflict

 Click on the headings to see examples of types of conflict situations and their potential causes.

Conflict between you and a colleague, or between team members	Conflict between you and a customer	Conflict between customers	Conflict between organisations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural differences • Personality clashes • Differences in values and ethics • Differences in work styles • Organisational change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The customer's expectations are not met • Poor service standards • Lack of professionalism • Poor product quality • Cultural differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-cultural misunderstandings • Drunk and disorderly patrons can cause problems with other customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems with quality and service of goods with suppliers. • Competition for customers between similar businesses • Employment relations issues with <i>unions</i> (glossary)



Note...

It is common to categorise customers as *internal* and *external* customers. *Internal* are co-workers or team-mates. *External* are customers, suppliers, contractors and even job applicants. Harmonious relationships with all customers are essential for business.

What happens when conflict is ignored or badly handled?

It is very common to think that if you ignore the conflict, it will go away. While sometimes this can happen, generally ignoring the problem will only make it worse. When conflict is not handled effectively, it can have a wide range of implications.



Click on the people to see who is affected.

You – the individual

- Stress
- Anxiety

- Difficulty concentrating
- Eating and sleeping problems
- Relationship problems
- More likely to make mistakes

The team and the organisation

- Poor communication
- Higher levels of accidents and incidents
- High staff turnover
- Poor reputation
- Loss of business
- More likely to deliver poor quality products and service
- May have increased legal costs

The customer

- Dissatisfaction with products and services
- Higher level of complaints
- An angry, dissatisfied customer will tell lots of people about their experience (poor 'word-of-mouth' marketing)

How do you identify conflict?

You can assume that any of the causes for conflict that we looked at earlier (lack of professionalism, misunderstandings, personality clashes, etc.) will potentially result in a conflict situation. For example, if your company changes its refund policy, potentially some customers will be unhappy.



Click on the icon to learn about other ways you can recognize it.

You can also recognise potential conflict by observing the situation. Imagine the following scenario.

Your co-worker bursts into the office and throws her bag onto the desk. She plops herself down in the chair sighing heavily. Her face is red and she is breathing deeply, so you ask, "What's wrong?", and she replies tersely,

"Nothing". Would you believe what she said?

When a person sends a mismatched message, such as in this example, we are not going to believe what they say. Being able to recognise negative language and voice tone can help identify potential problems early.

Click to the next screen to learn how.

The communication process

The total message we receive in the communication process is made up of non-verbal, verbal and vocal cues.



Click on the pie chart to view the key parts of the communication process.

55%

Non-verbal

Non-verbal cues have a huge impact on how we interpret what is being communicated.

- Body language and posture
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact
- Hand gestures
- Personal space, for example, how close two people are standing

38%

Vocal

We convey emotion in how we say something. Speech contains a lot of non-verbal elements.

- Volume
- Pitch
- Intonation and stress
- Pace

7%

Verbal

Verbal refers to the words we use. Incredibly, what we say accounts for only a small portion of how communication is interpreted.

Source as at Aug 2013: adapted from Mehrabian, A., 1971. Silent Messages. Wadsworth, Belmont, CA, USA.



Hot tip

While we are not body language experts, it really helps to look at what the person is saying and how they are saying it. However, don't read non-verbal signals in isolation. Consider the entire context of the situation.

What are the levels or stages of conflict?

Not all conflicts will move through these five stages. It depends on how early the conflict is identified, how well it is handled and the situation itself. Generally, the more advanced the conflict, the more damage is done to relationships and reputations. To prevent any damage, it is best to tackle the cause of the conflict well before it reaches a crisis point.



Click on each stage to learn more about each one.

The 'Conflict Level Network' (Copyright © The Conflict Resolution Network, PO Box 1016, Chatswood, NSW 3057)

Discomfort

Perhaps nothing is yet said. Things don't feel right. It may be difficult to identify what the problem is. You feel uncomfortable about a situation and may not be quite sure why.

For example, you feel like one of your co-workers is ignoring you. They seem to avoid making eye contact and give you short simple responses when you ask a question.

Incident

The incident stage is the event or situation that has the potential to trigger conflict. Some conflict situations may skip the first stage and start with an incident.

For example, you supervise a small team of people in which writing rosters is part of your duties. After handing out the roster for the next month, one of your staff members begins to complain loudly about how unfair the roster is. You haven't given them the day off they had requested.

Keep an eye out for incidents. Don't ignore them. If you think someone is quietly 'simmering', work on a plan for how you might tackle the situation.

Misunderstanding

Misunderstandings can occur through poor communication, unclear expectations and differences in personal beliefs and values.

For example, you work as a guest service agent for an airline. You are trying to check-in Ms Hopkins, a *VIP* (glossary) guest. She has Trixi, her miniature dog, with her in her handbag. You explain that in Australia, dogs must travel in the cargo hold. Ms Hopkins starts to become upset. She says she believes that as a first-class passenger, she is entitled to have Trixi travel in the cabin with her.

However, remember that if a dog is a certified disability service animal, for example, a guide dog, it can travel in the cabin. In fact, it is an offence to refuse access to public places such as shops, hotels, pubs, restaurants, and all forms of transport.

Tension

At this stage, feelings of anxiety are common and you have come to expect the worst from the other person. Relationships become weighed down by negative attitudes and fixed opinions. The relationship has become a source of constant worry and concern for you.

For example, you are sure your manager doesn't like you. Every time you get your roster, there are problems with it. You seem to get most of the split shifts and haven't had a weekend off in months. Co-workers appear to get the shifts they request, but you don't. Every time you see your manager, you feel angry.

Crisis

This is where tensions explode and it's unpleasant for everyone involved. At this stage emotions are so high, that usually rational thought is lost. Therefore, it is always best to prevent conflict escalating to crisis level, as long-term negative impacts can be huge. It could result in violence, verbal abuse, or walking out on a job.

For example, you hear yelling coming from the purchasing office area. You investigate and are confronted by a scene involving the purchasing officer and a supplier. They are shouting at each other and the supplier's face is red with rage. He starts shaking his fist in warning.

How is potential conflict identified?

Once you understand the levels of conflict, you can be on the look out for indicators of potential conflict. If you can identify conflict early, particularly at the discomfort stage, you can take action that will hopefully prevent the situation from worsening.



Click on the icon to hear about an example.

A loud and abusive customer at the bar is causing other customers to leave the establishment. The supervisor identifies the potential for conflict and addresses the matter while it is still at the 'discomfort' stage.

If this situation had been ignored, it would have become harder to resolve. The intoxicated customer may have become more intoxicated and less receptive to any discussion and the other customers may have lodged a formal complaint.



Hot tip

The earlier a conflict situation is identified, the sooner you can put in place a resolution strategy and prevent the situation worsening. This will minimise damage to your establishment's reputation, protect staff, and ensure your customers keep coming back.

Common conflict situations with customers

Whether you work in hospitality, tourism, travel or events, we all deal with customers, both internal and external. There are many common causes of conflict.



What are some common examples? Click on the tabs to find out.

Delays or poor timing with products and services

- We ordered ages ago. Why are our meals taking so long?
- I asked for the music to start after the cake was cut. This is so disorganised.
- We asked for a wake-up call for 7 am and were woken at 6 am!
- The bus is late. We're going to miss our connection.

Communication barriers and problems

- You're talking too quickly. I don't understand. (An international guest is having difficulty making themselves understood).
- I didn't get your email!
- I read the travel insurance brochure, and I'm sure this situation was covered.
- We were told we could extend the music to finish at 1 am if we wanted.

Expectations not met

- The tour you recommended was badly organised and didn't cover all the sites as the brochure outlined.
- This is not a luxury coach. Look how old it is!
- We're not paying for this!

Customers with special needs

- We were promised a room near the lift. My wife can't walk very far.
- I clearly explained I have a wheat intolerance. Why are there breadcrumbs on my chicken?

Problems or faults with products and services

- This isn't what I ordered.
- My coffee is cold.
- What do you mean the tour is cancelled!
- The data-show won't work. How can we run our presentation?
- The sound quality is terrible. Patrons are complaining.



Note...

In the next section we will look at how you resolve common situations, using conflict resolution skills and common organisation policies.

What duties and responsibilities do you have?

Every manager/supervisor is also a human resource manager. Can you think of some staffing or human resource management duties and responsibilities?

You have 15 seconds to list as many as you can.



Click start to begin.

'What staffing or human resource responsibilities does a manager have?

List as many as you can.

How did you go?

Did you list recruitment, organising rosters, coaching, resolving grievances? Well done if you did.

Let's look at these and others on the next screen.

Duties and responsibilities

At every level of management, from team leader to senior management, a large portion of the job involves staffing or Human Resource (HR) management functions.



Click on the dot points to learn what these include.

- Recruitment, selection and promotion decisions.
- Creating job descriptions and organising job duties and responsibilities.
- Organising rosters.
- Checking timesheets, pay and conditions of work.
- Coaching and training.
- Performance management including giving feedback and conducting performance appraisals, counselling poor performance, and terminating employment.
- Meeting standards and procedures, particularly *duty of care* (glossary) obligations and abiding by relevant legislation, concerning such matters as *WHS* (glossary), anti-discrimination, bullying and harassment.
- Resolving *grievances* (glossary). Managing grievance procedures.

Medium to large organisations may have a specialised department to oversee policy and planning for human resource management. Even with a HR department, all levels of management are still heavily involved in human resource management functions.

Common conflict situations in managing people

Whether you are a team member, leader or manager, human resource issues can be a common source of conflict.



Click on the thunder clouds to see some common issues.

Missed out on a promotion

A staff member angry and resentful about missing out on a promotion.

Roster issues

A staff member complaining about the roster being unfair. For example, last minute roster changes, not receiving the shifts they wanted, not wanting to work with particular staff members.

Lack of job competence

A staff member complaining about the perceived poor work standards of another. For example, they think the other staff member is incompetent or lazy.

Refusing to follow company standards and policy

A staff member is refusing to follow grooming standards, safety standards, or a direction given to them by management.

**Note...**

Some conflict situations can be isolated incidents and easy to diffuse. It's when the conflict threatens safety that the bigger issues arise. Let's look at this next.

When does conflict threaten safety?

Everyone, including managers, supervisors, colleagues and customers, must be aware of conflict situations that may be potentially dangerous.



Click on the questions to find out more.

What are some potentially dangerous circumstances?

- When responding to violent or threatening customers.
- When dealing with customers who are drug or alcohol affected.
- When customers enter the premises armed with weapons or guns.
- In situations where someone has been or may be injured.
- In situations where customers refuse to leave or be pacified.

If the personal safety of another is threatened, then immediate action must be taken to avoid injury and property damage.

What's an example of a threatening situation?

A recent incident at a hotel saw two large groups of people come together in a wild brawl. A group of 50 university students came to blows with a group of intoxicated soccer fans. The conflict arose over a defamatory remark made by one of the soccer fans to the girlfriend of one of the university students. Without warning, chairs, tables and glasses were thrown through the air. The police were called and a number of people were removed from the premises.

What do I do when things get out of hand?

In a situation like this, you should not step in between the aggressors, but take preventative action. This may involve organising security to assist or the police to attend. If no action is taken and the situation is left to resolve itself, there is potential for serious injury to customers and staff.

In the interest of safety to your customers, colleagues and yourself, be vigilant in following organisational policies and procedures.

What resources can assist in managing conflict?

Depending on the size of your establishment, you may have access to any or all of the following resources.



Click on the staff to see who they are.

Senior staff

Utilise senior staff in situations where there is a conflict between colleagues, or when the customer asks to speak to a higher authority. Seek advice from senior staff any time you feel unsure about how to handle a conflict situation.

Other staff members

Some of your colleagues may have more experience responding to conflict situations than you. Utilise their experience and seek their assistance when dealing with a difficult or aggressive customer.

Internal security or police

Call upon the assistance of security personnel in the first instance when responding to dangerous situations, dealing with intoxicated or drug affected customers, or an assault. The police should also be contacted, especially when laws are broken and people's safety is at risk.

Mediators (counsellors or human resource personnel)

Counsellors and human resource personnel are particularly useful in cases where *mediation* is required between employees.



In a nutshell

You don't tackle conflict alone. Make sure you are aware of and utilise the resources available to you.

Teamwork skills

Having different opinions is not inconsistent with the notion of teamwork. However, it can lead to conflict if not handled effectively.



Click on Zoe to see some helpful teamwork skills.

There are a number of reasons why teamwork skills are so important.

Working together to develop a clear team mission or purpose.

- Establishing clear roles and responsibilities within the team.
- Discussing and deciding together about team targets.
- Establishing ground rules on how the team will work. This could include:
 - when you will meet
 - punctuality
 - communication standards, such as listening, not swearing, not talking over others
 - using team-work processes such as brainstorming
 - not criticising statements by other people until all ideas have been generated
 - encouraging all points of view
 - not getting personal by focussing on discussion and evaluation of the work.
- Having clearly defined project standards and time lines.
- Giving positive feedback to team members.
- Celebrating team achievements.

End of section

You have reached the end of section 1.

Click to the next section to continue.

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2

Section 2: Resolve conflict

On completion of this section you will learn the following.

- How to establish and agree on the nature and details of conflict.
- How to manage conflict according to organisational procedures.
- How to take responsibility for seeking a solution.
- How to identify and evaluate impact of conflict.
- How to evaluate options to resolve the conflict.
- How to implement the best solution and complete required reports.

What is your communication style?

How you communicate is influenced by many factors, such as education, family upbringing, friends and personality. Before we look at the different conflict resolution techniques, it will be helpful to understand your communication style.



Click on Zoe to find out more about individual communication styles.

If you understand your communication style, you can improve your ability to constructively manage conflict situations.

Assertive communicators are the most effective in handling conflict situations. They are not afraid to address problems early. They respect the opinions of others and speak calmly and confidently, working towards a mutually satisfying solution.

Which category do you fall into? It may be that you fall into two categories. Keep your communication style in mind as you look at the different resolution strategies.



Click on the icon to see the different communication styles.

	During communication do you...	In your approach to conflict, do you...
Passive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think other people's rights and feelings are more important than yours? • Speak softly or apologetically? • Avoid eye contact? • Have closed body language, e.g. arms crossed, head down? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tend to avoid conflict situations? • Often feel angry and resentful because your views are not listened to? • Let conflict situations build until crisis level, where you might then explode in anger? • Approach conflict on a 'you win, I lose' basis?

	During communication do you...	In your approach to conflict, do you...
Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not listen well? • Interrupt frequently? • Speak loudly and aggressively? • Try to dominate others, particularly through overbearing posture? • Blame, criticise, humiliate others? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often feel you are right and everyone else is wrong? • Have a low level of tolerance and get angry easily? • Approach conflict with an 'I win, you lose' attitude?
Passive-aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appear passive, calm and cooperative but underneath are seething with anger? • Use sarcasm? • Deny and avoid problems? • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often feel powerless, angry and resentful? • Try to 'get even' by doing things to annoy and disrupt others? • Approach conflict with a 'we will both lose' attitude?
Assertive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen without interrupting? • Speak calmly and clearly? • Show respect for others and their feelings and opinions? • Make good eye contact? • Use open body language gestures? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confront conflict situations with confidence? • Focus on the problem and not get personal? • Express feelings and needs clearly, honestly and appropriately? • Approach conflict with a 'win-win' attitude?

What are the different conflict resolution strategies you can use?

To resolve conflict, there are several techniques you can use. Not all will lead to a mutually satisfying outcome.



Click on the pictures to see what they are.

- Competing
- Accommodating
- Avoiding
- Compromising
- Collaborating

Which one do you use?

Well, your choice of strategy depends on the circumstances surrounding the conflict. Your goal is to create a situation in which everyone's expectations are matched together. This creates a win-win situation for all.

Let's look at each strategy in more detail over the next few screens.

Competing

This conflict resolution style is uncompromising. Communication is direct, demanding and often aggressive. This method is based on power where a person may use their position, authority or wealth to influence. Little if any regard is given to the feelings or views of others. It frequently leads to a clear winner and loser, which may leave the loser with feelings of hostility and resentment.



Click on the pictures to find out more.

A competing strategy used inappropriately

'Simone get over here! What have I told you before about wearing earrings? NO drop earrings. Studs only. If I have to remind you again, it will be an official warning. Now go and take them off.'

This kind of response results in a 'win-lose' solution. You may get Simone to do the right thing, but in the process you might destroy any chance of a good working relationship. People who use this strategy to resolve conflict are usually tagged as 'hard to get along with'. It invariably causes staff to end up at odds with each other.

A competing strategy used appropriately

If this resolution style is so harsh then should it ever be used? There are situations when it may be appropriate.

- When a quick decision or action is needed.
- In an emergency situation, or when someone's safety is at stake.
- When important but unpopular decisions need to be made, e.g., cost-cutting and down-sizing.

'Stop! That's not how you were shown how to use the slicer. Ryan, you know better than that! You'll lose a finger and then what?'

In this situation the issue is more important than how the communication is perceived. Direct, clear commands are essential in breaches of WHS issues.

Accommodating

This conflict management style could be regarded as the 'peacekeeper' style. It's where you take a passive and submissive approach because you are putting someone else's needs and demands before your own. This style of conflict management is frequently appropriate in a customer service situation, when it is more important to have a happy customer than to prove a point.



Click on Zoe to find out when to use the accommodating strategy.

While sometimes 'accommodating' may be appropriate with colleagues, for creating harmony and goodwill, you may be seen as 'too nice'. This can lead to staff taking advantage of you, and compromising your credibility.

The accommodation strategy may also be used in the following situations.

- When preserving the relationship is more important than winning.
- When building harmony and goodwill is important and doesn't come at a significant cost to the company or yourself.
- When you realise you are wrong.



Click on the icon for an example of an accommodating strategy in action.

Using an accommodating strategy

'My apologies. I can take the sandwich back and have another one made without butter. It will take about five minutes. Is that OK with you?'

The customer may not always be right, but they are still the customer! Even if you are certain the customer never said 'no butter' on their sandwich, most businesses agree there is no point arguing with a customer, even when you are 100 per cent sure the customer has their facts wrong. It only breeds resentment and results in unhappy customers who do not return.

It is considered a good conflict resolution style when you can minimise your losses yet maintain an environment of cooperation between you and your colleagues.

Avoiding

It is very common for people to want to avoid conflict. Most of us find conflict stressful, particularly if your natural communication style tends to be passive. Ignoring or withdrawing from conflict situations often results in a 'lose-lose' situation where no one gets what they want. Conflict left unresolved usually builds resentment and makes the situation worse.



Click on the tabs to find out more.

Avoidance is sometimes appropriate

Here are some situations when the avoidance strategy is appropriate.

- When the issue is trivial, and your time is better spent elsewhere.
- When it is not the right time or place to constructively address the issue.
- When you need time to think about how you might handle the situation.
- When it's not your place to get involved.

Taking 'time out'

Temporarily avoiding an issue to allow angry people to 'cool down' is an excellent way to diffuse a situation and stop it from *escalating* (glossary). Constructive, rational conversation can't happen when emotions are high. However, the conflict still needs to be assertively addressed at the appropriate time. We will look at this in more detail later in the unit.

Effective use of the strategy

'Why can't we check in now? We're exhausted. This is ridiculous. I can't believe we've come off a 24-hour flight only to be told we can't check in. It's 10.30 am, hardly the crack of dawn! Is your hotel so disorganised that you can't have a room ready by now? I'll be telling all my friends about this.'

'Mr Williams, as I explained, our check-in time is 2 pm. My apologies if your travel agent didn't explain this to you. I will have our concierge show you and your wife to the restaurant where you can have a complimentary tea or coffee. Your luggage will be taken care of. While you take some refreshments, I'm going to make some calls and see what we can do about getting a room ready for you soon.'



Hot tip

When dealing with irate people and you can feel yourself losing your temper, make an excuse to leave the situation. Ask the other party to take a seat and tell them you need to make a phone call to check something. Leave for a few minutes only. This can help everyone get their emotions in check.

Compromising

Compromising is a conflict resolution style that is moderately assertive and partly collaborative. Using this method, you generally find the middle ground: a solution that is partially acceptable to both parties. This style can be a quick fix remedy, particularly in a situation where a deadline is looming. It does not completely solve everything, as both parties often focus on their own needs, not fully understanding the other. This can leave both parties not fully satisfied and could fail to address the underlying reasons for the conflict occurring in the first place.

What's an example of the compromising strategy used effectively?

Effective use of compromising

'Hanad, you've heard what Sonia has had to say. She needs the specifications, with a full costing by Friday morning at the latest. Otherwise there won't be time to finish the proposal.'

'There is no way I can get the specifications and costings done by Friday morning. My department is under the pump already. We have two other jobs on. The best I can do is have the specifications ready, but the costings will have to wait till next week. If Sonia wants the costings done earlier, then she will have to send someone from her department to help.'



In a nutshell

Commonly, as a supervisor or manager, you'll need to help mediate a conflict situation. You can see both sides of a situation, so your role is to find some sort of common ground that leaves everyone satisfied. It is particularly useful when both parties in the situation are on equal ground, but with opposing views, and a deadline must be met.

Collaborating

This method involves working together to come up with a solution that satisfies all concerned. It is largely viewed as a 'win-win' conflict resolution strategy. It is constructive and fair and gives both parties a chance to meet their expectations.



Click on the dot points to find out when to use the collaborating strategy.

- In team environments, it helps ensure even distribution of work amongst team members.
- In team environments, this style can support creativity in decision-making, better brainstorming, and understanding of each other's needs and wants.
- This style is useful when it is important to create trust and build mutually satisfying long-term relationships.



Click on the icon to see to an example of the collaborating style used effectively.

Effective use of collaboration

'I understand you're upset. I was very disappointed about missing out on the proposal too. What more can we do to get them to accept our submissions?'

'Please don't think I was trying to blame you. I wasn't. I just think the layout of the proposal had a lot to do with not being chosen.'

'Oh, OK. Can you explain what you mean? How do you think the layout could be improved?'

Though it is the most effective conflict resolution style, it is also the hardest to implement. It requires practice and skill in problem-solving and communication. It requires commitment from both parties to want to work towards a mutually acceptable outcome. This takes time, assertive communication and empathy. We'll cover more on assertive communication later in this section.

What is empathy?

Empathy involves understanding and sharing the feelings of another person. It's the same as putting yourself in somebody else's shoes. When you display empathy you first need to listen. Following this, you need to identify both the feeling and the issue at hand. It is important that you consider the bigger picture.

When assertiveness and empathy are combined, you will come up with a fair and direct communication style.



Click on the icon to listen to an example.

'I understand that this is important to you and you want me to help immediately, but I have just worked for six hours without a break. I really need to grab a bite to eat. How about we meet in 15 minutes?'

A final thought on conflict styles

Regardless of the conflict resolution style you use, it is important to listen to all points of view and treat each person with respect. Whether you use the avoidance method or collaboration, you must at least give the conflicting parties a chance to express their side of the story. In some cases the conflict will be resolved then and there, as all they were looking for was a chance to 'get it off their chest'.

How do you know your communication is effective?

Effective communication is the exchange of information, thoughts, opinions, ideas and feelings between two or more people resulting in their mutual understanding.

Communication involves any behaviour, verbal or non-verbal, that sends a message to someone. We could say communication has taken place when a message is sent to or received by another person. Ultimately, effective communication only takes place when the message is received and understood in the way the sender intended.

What communication techniques help you manage conflict?

Follow these steps to effectively use communication skills and resolve conflict.

Step 1: Active listening

Step 2: Ask questions

Step 3: Be assertive and show empathy

Step 4: Recognise and use appropriate communication

Step 5: Be sensitive to cultural differences

Let's examine each step in more detail over the next few screens.

Active listening

Listening and hearing are not the same thing. Hearing is a physiological process and listening is what we do to construct meaningful messages during communication.

It is very common to 'wait to talk' rather than fully listening to others. Active listening means making a conscious effort to hear what the other person is saying.



Click on the icon to see what this involves.

- Listening to the whole message. Take into account the non-verbal cues. What are they telling you? How do you think the person is feeling?
- Paraphrase or re-state in your own words what you think you have heard, to ensure understanding.
- Avoid distractions. Give the speaker your full attention.

Ask questions

Listening is followed up with asking questions. Don't interrupt. Wait until the other person has finished. Asking questions helps gain and clarify information and helps with understanding.

Use open questions. These are questions that begin with the following.

- **Why?** Why is it important to you to make these changes?
- **What?** What do you think about this situation?
- **How?** How long did it take for the order to arrive?
- **When?** When would you like to meet up so we can discuss this further?
- **Who?** Who do you think should be involved in the new team?

What do I do after asking the questions?

Paraphrasing

After asking questions, paraphrase the responses to clarify information and check for common understanding. This means to restate the information in your own words.

For example: 'So, you originally asked for your wakeup call to be at 7:30 am and then you called back and changed it to 7:00 am, but you received the call at 6.30 am. Is that correct?'

How do you communicate to show assertiveness and empathy?

Earlier we looked at what it means to be an assertive communicator. Assertive communicators approach conflict with a 'win-win' attitude.

You have 30 seconds to see if you can recall some skills that demonstrate assertive and empathetic communication.

Click start to begin.

Which communication skills demonstrate assertiveness and empathy?

How did you go?

Listening without interrupting, speaking calmly, using open body language: these are a few that you may have thought of.

Click to the next screen to compare your answers.

Be assertive and show empathy

Now it is time to put into practice some of the strategies we covered earlier in assertive communication and demonstrating empathy.



Click on the dot points to see some conflict resolution skills.

- Listen without interrupting
- Speak calmly and clearly
- Show respect for others and their feelings and opinions
- Make good eye contact
- Use open body language gestures
- Confront conflict situations with confidence
- Focus on the problem and don't get personal.
- Express feelings and needs clearly, honestly, appropriately

Another important part of effective assertive communication is the use of 'I' messages. Click to the next screen to learn more about these messages.

Using 'I' messages

Using 'I' messages, rather than 'you' messages can help create an environment of open communication.



Click on the icon to listen to the 'You' message restated as an 'I' message.

You message: 'You're late again! You make me so angry because I'm the one left having to set everything up.'

I message: 'I feel upset when you come in late because I have to do the set up on my own, and it makes it a stressful start to the shift.'

In 'you' type messages, the other party only hears blame, judgement and criticism. It tends to put the person in a defensive position, where they make excuses, and often the conflict escalates.

An 'I' message often has three parts

1. Describes the behaviour
2. Describes the feeling the behaviour creates
3. Describes the effect the behaviour has

'I' messages are particularly powerful in showing empathy and demonstrating that you can identify with the other person's feelings even if you don't agree with what the person is saying or how they are saying it. Don't take it personally. Focus on the message.

Think about communication

Earlier we looked at how the total message you receive in the communication process is made up of non-verbal, verbal and vocal cues. Paying attention to non-verbal and vocal cues (voice tone, pace, volume) is important, as they make up the majority of the message we receive.

You have 30 seconds to list as many non-verbal cues as you can recall.

Click start to begin.

List as many examples of non-verbal cues as you can.

How did you go? Compare your answers to these.

- Body language
- Posture
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact
- Hand gestures
- Personal space, for example, how close two people are standing

Recognise and use appropriate communication

It is important to ensure your words, voice tone and body language match. This demonstrates genuine interest in what others are saying, and honesty and sincerity in your communication. For example, telling someone you're interested in what they have to say, but then you look at your phone while they talk, doesn't really show you're interested!

A mismatch in words, body language and tone can alert you to potential problems and prevent conflict from escalating.

How can I contain anger, annoyance and frustration when dealing with conflict?**Containing negative emotions in your speech**

- Don't be sarcastic.
- Speak clearly and avoid raising your voice.
- Make eye contact.

- Breathe deeply and stand up straight.
- Ensure you look after yourself physically and emotionally. Drink plenty of water, eat healthily and regularly and get plenty of sleep. It is difficult to remain calm when you are hungry! If you have dealt with a particularly difficult situation, it can help to talk about it with someone else (more on this later).



Hot tip

Remember the strategy of taking ‘time out’ if you feel yourself losing your temper.

Be sensitive to cultural differences

Cross-cultural misunderstandings with colleagues and customers can happen for many reasons. We live and work in a diverse community with people from different cultural backgrounds with varying customs, beliefs and values.



Click on the tabs to find out more.

Cross-cultural differences

Some cultures place more importance on time than others. A customer might be very anxious if the bus is five minutes late. A client might not think arriving 30 minutes late to an appointment is a cause for concern.

Customers from countries or cities with high crime rates might be very concerned about their safety. They might insist on watching you handle their belongings, or destroy credit cards copies in front of them.

Manners, dress code and polite forms of address can be very different across cultures. For example, loudly sniffing, burping or chewing may not be considered disrespectful.

Language difficulties

People can become easily frustrated when they cannot make themselves understood. In trying to communicate, sentences may come across as rude, for example, ‘you do this now’.

The English language is notoriously difficult to learn. For people with English as their second language, it can create problems and misunderstandings, even if they’ve been speaking English for years.

Communication tips

- Where the language level is low, it may be appropriate to speak slowly. Avoid the common trap of raising your voice to be understood.
- Use simple words and short sentences.
- Check common understanding by asking the person to repeat the message back through words, writing or actions.
- Avoid *jargon* or *slang* (glossary). For example ‘the ETD is 1600 hours, or ‘G’day’.
- Use resources available to you, such as other staff, translation services, writing things down and showing pictures and diagrams.

- Try to learn some simple words or gestures in the other person's language.
- Be aware of your own communication style, such as your use of humour and rules of politeness. Be careful that your style isn't offensive to someone from a different culture.

General issues

Remember, people can have very different values, attitudes and behaviours to you. It is not simply a case of being right or wrong but being open to a different interpretation. You can reduce the chance of a misunderstanding by showing tolerance and awareness of cultural differences. Maintain a professional attitude and vary your verbal and non-verbal communication accordingly.

How do you resolve conflict effectively?

Follow these steps to resolve conflict effectively.

Step 1: Take responsibility

Step 2: Use an appropriate conflict management strategy

Step 3: Agree on the nature of the conflict

Step 4: Discuss and evaluate options

Step 5: Agree, apply and follow-up

Let's look at each of these steps over the next few screens.

Step 1: Take responsibility

If everyone took responsibility for resolving conflict, then you wouldn't see many situations spiralling to crisis point. The reality is, this doesn't often happen.



Click on the icon to find out more.

Although it is usually the responsibility of those involved in conflict to resolve it, this may not always be the case. It may depend on a number of things.

- Your position in the workplace
- The people involved
- The nature of the conflict

As professionals, you should take responsibility and attempt to handle conflict. This means identifying conflict early and using resources available to you, if necessary.



Hot tip

Make sure you are familiar with the resources available to you. Remember, you have other staff, management, security, police, human resource personnel and counsellors that can help.

Step 2: Use an appropriate conflict management strategy

There are a number of conflict resolution styles that can be used depending on the situation, the parties involved, and constraints you are working within.

Can you remember them? We discussed them in the previous section.

Collaborating	Win-win approach where the needs of both parties are addressed.
Competing	Win-lose approach. Your needs are more important than the needs of others.
Avoiding	Conflict is not addressed. This might be appropriate in high-tension situations until emotions have cooled.
Compromising	Trade-offs are made until both parties are reasonably satisfied.
Accommodating	Lose-win situation. The other party's needs are more important, such as in a customer service situation.

Step 3: Agree on the nature of the conflict

What is the conflict about? What are the real issues?

Use effective communication skills, as defined earlier, to establish the nature and details of the conflict.

Whenever possible, avoid resolving conflict situations in front of an audience such as other staff and customers. It can complicate the situation, cause embarrassment, and make it difficult to concentrate on the issue.

Take advantage of private areas available to you, such as an office, boardroom or quiet area in your venue.



Note...

Whenever possible, get everyone involved to take a seat. Sit next to each other, on a 45 degree angle. Avoid sitting opposite each other, with a physical barrier in front, such as a desk. This helps create an environment of open communication.

Step 4: Discuss and evaluate options

The solution to a conflict situation often requires a range of problem-solving skills, which can include critical thinking skills and careful negotiation. Critical thinking skills can include observation, interpretation, analysis and evaluation. They are used in a problem-solving process. Let's look at some common steps.



Click on each step to reveal the critical thinking skills.

Problem-solving step	Critical thinking skills
Defining the problem	<p>Gather relevant information</p> <p>Prioritise. What needs to be solved first? What information is more important?</p> <p>Recognise your own values and assumptions. What judgements have I already made about the situation? What is the basis for these judgements? Are they correct?</p>
Generating alternatives	<p>Interpret information and data.</p> <p>Brainstorm ideas.</p> <p>Research sources of assistance, both within your company and externally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> External sources could include training organisations, government departments and industry/employer groups.
Evaluating and selecting alternatives	<p>Analyse options. In the process, ask yourself these questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are positives and negatives of each option? How will each option affect all parties involved in the conflict? Is there a potential legal liability? What effect will the resolution have on the reputation of the business?
Implementing solutions	<p>Test options. At times, it may be appropriate to try different solutions.</p> <p>Take responsibility to ensure the solution is carried out.</p>

Negotiation strategies

After you have agreed on the nature and parts of the problem, there are many options you can use to come up with solutions. This frequently involves a process of bargaining or negotiating with others.



Click on the dot points for some negotiation strategies.

- Put your ideas forward.
- Ask the other party what they would like to see happen.
- Break the situation into small 'chunks' and focus on each part.
- Brainstorm ideas and then select a few that could work.
- In complicated situations, select several options. This includes looking at best alternatives and worst-case alternatives, should you not be able to negotiate a solution.

Patience is often required when resolving conflict. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you can resolve every conflict on the spot. In some cases the process may take several weeks!

Work within the policies and constraints of your organisation

Organisations will differ in regard to their policies and procedures. It is important to familiarise yourself with them and work within their constraints. Seek assistance from resources available to you if you are unsure about a workplace policy or procedure.



Click on Zoe to learn more.

These are some policies and constraints you might encounter.

- Employee *grievance* (glossary) procedures
- Refund and exchange policies
- Cancellation procedures
- Customer complaint handling procedures
- Standard solutions for common complaints. For example, cold food and incorrect orders
- Budgetary constraints.
- Availability of replacement products and services
- Your level of responsibility and empowerment. For example, are you able to make the decision to offer a discount without management approval?

It's very important to consider the potential impact of the conflict and the resolution options on the reputation of the business. In some difficult and complex situations, legal liability may also be a factor.

Step 5: Agree, apply and follow-up

After discussion and negotiation, where all viewpoints are considered and respected, a solution needs to be agreed upon. As a final check ask yourself these questions.

- Are there any long-term problems with this solution?
- Are there any reasons as to why it may not work?
- Is it fair and reasonable to all concerned?

When you have come to an agreed resolution, it is time to put it into place. Taking action is possibly the most important part of resolving the conflict. The solution must be implemented, not just talked about.

Sometimes this will involve other staff and departments. However, take responsibility for ensuring the solution has been implemented. Check with the parties involved to ensure the situation has been satisfactorily resolved. We will discuss this further in the next section.



In a nutshell

Resolution options can range from the simple to the very complex. It may require careful negotiation with many people over a period of time to come to a satisfactory resolution. The conflict situation and options available need to factor in the impact on the reputation of staff, customers and the company as well as potential legal obligations.

Step 6: Complete documentation

Depending on the nature of the conflict, you may be required to complete records or forms.



Click on Zoe to see some examples.

Some records or forms you may come across include these examples.

- Incident reports following situations when a customer or employee is injured or property has been damaged.
- Internal personnel or human resource records following counselling of an employee or mediation between colleagues.
- Complaints records in situations where customers have formalised a complaint.
- Police reports and statements.

Accuracy, legibility and timeliness are essential when completing documentation. The information you record may have a significant impact on a customer, your colleagues or the establishment, and in some cases may be referred to by police, or in a court of law.

End of section

You have reached the end of section 2.

Click to the next section to continue.

3

Section 3: Evaluate conflict resolution

On completion of this section you will learn the following.

- How to communicate with the parties involved to seek and provide feedback.
- How to evaluate the conflict and effectiveness of the solution.
- How to determine possible causes of conflict and provide input for improvements.

Treat conflict as an opportunity to learn!

Evaluating the cause, management and resolution of a conflict situation can give you an opportunity to learn from it.



How is this possible? Click on the question marks to find out.

- You can improve current business practices such as organisational procedures, standards and policies.
- You can improve your communication and conflict resolution skills.
- You may be able to potentially prevent similar situations from occurring again.

Click to the next screen to see how you can do this.

Seek and provide feedback

Part of taking responsibility means following the outcome through to the end. Was the conflict resolved? Were the parties involved happy with the outcome?

How do we answer these questions? Ask the people involved!



Click on the people below to see to some examples.

'How are you finding the new roster scheduling software? Have you found it is an improvement on the old system?'

'Good morning. I am calling to advise that your make-up pay went into your account this morning. Again, please accept my apology for the error with your pay. We have corrected the problem with the system, and it shouldn't happen again.'

'Mr Freemantle, I am just following up regarding the technical problems you experienced with the sound equipment yesterday. Are you satisfied with how the system is operating now?'

'Hi Nimeshi. I would like to arrange a meeting to chat with you regarding the training improvements. I'd really like your feedback on how things are going in the department. How does 4.00 pm this afternoon sound?'



Hot tip

In the process of seeking and providing feedback, it is important to gather information for later evaluation and improvement strategies.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation is a process of understanding what went wrong and why. What can be learnt from the situation? How can we prevent it from occurring again?

After a conflict situation has been resolved and you've contacted the people involved to check they are satisfied with the outcomes, it is time for evaluation.



Click on the icon to find out how an evaluation occurs.

How the evaluation will occur depends on organisational policies, the parties involved in the conflict, the nature of the conflict, and its level of seriousness.

As we have identified throughout the unit, workplace conflict can occur on many levels and between a number of different people.

- You and a colleague or between team members
- You and a customer
- Between customers
- Between organisations

What is evaluated?

A number of things may be evaluated depending on the circumstances.

- Effectiveness of policies and procedures such as grievance procedures, customer complaint handling procedures and/or refund and cancellation policies.
- The conflict resolution process.
- Potential legal liability. Was there a duty of care?
- Potential impact on the future of the business.
- Whether resolution was satisfactory to all parties involved.
- The financial cost of the resolution.

How is conflict evaluated?

Depending on the nature of the conflict, it may be appropriate to gather and compile data on the conflict to help with evaluation. Compiling data involves a range of skills including the ability to research on-line sources, as well as report-and letter-writing skills.



Click on the tabs to find out the different ways to gather data.

Written data

- Customer complaint log or register
- Complaint letters and emails

- Customer satisfaction evaluations
- Data from on-line sites such as your web page, customer review sites, blogs and wikis. Examples include TripAdvisor, Urbanspoon and Alistguide.
- Incident or incident reports
- Other internal reports and forms that may have been used in a grievance procedure.

Meetings with colleagues

Face-to-face communication is essential. This could involve one-on-one meetings. Conflict may involve several people and it may be an opportunity for others to learn. Teamwork skills are important to effective conflict evaluation. Open, honest communication free from defensive reasoning is required to really listen to feedback.

Click to the next screen to learn about using teams to evaluate conflict.

Working in teams to evaluate conflict



Click on the tabs to discover ways evaluation can occur using teams.

Shift briefings (pre- and post-shift)

These can be used to address conflict in its early stages. Employees meet before the shift to discuss roles and responsibilities and areas of importance. A well run meeting can improve the efficiency of the shift and prevent conflict situations that may occur due to misunderstandings about job roles and expectations. A post- shift briefing is an opportunity to discuss conflict situations such as customer complaints and misunderstandings between co-workers.

Department team-member meetings

These may occur weekly or monthly and involve all the staff from a department.

Problem-solving groups

A common example of this is a 'focus group' whose sole purpose is to make improvements on a function or area of business. Focus groups could involve people from different departments across the organisation. This can help identify common themes in conflict across the company and strategies to improve practices.

Management team meeting

Management level employees meet on a regular basis to discuss and evaluate issues within their department.

Whatever methods you use to evaluate conflict, it is important to identify common themes in *causes* of workplace conflict and follow through with *improvements* to workplace practices. Click to the next screen to learn more.

Common causes of workplace conflict

As identified in sections 1 and 2, there are many causes of workplace conflict.



Click on the icon to review.

- Delays or poor timing with products and services
- Communication barriers and problems
- Personality differences
- Expectations of products and services not met
- Different values and goals
- Problems or faults with products and services
- Stress and emotional issues
- Human resource management problems, such as problems with rosters and pay, or discrimination issues
- Changes to workplace systems and procedures.



Note...

When an organisation goes through a process of change, when, for example, a new customer management software system is introduced, it is normal for staff to feel fear. This comes from uncertainty... how will my job be affected? Will this new technology replace my job? Will I be able to learn the new system?

What workplace enhancements can be made as a result of conflict?

With the strategies used to evaluate data, you may identify common themes in causes of conflict. This is an opportunity to adjust systems and procedures to prevent conflict from occurring again.



Click on the dot points for examples of workplace improvements.

- You notice a pattern of customer complaints regarding your organisation's cancellation policy, so you recommend reviewing it.
- You notice tension and poor communication between two departments. It is causing problems and is affecting customer service. You decide to bring the two department managers together to discuss strategies for improvement.
- Recently there have been several incidents regarding intoxicated patrons. You organise a meeting to review the policy and training of staff regarding responsible service of alcohol.
- You receive several complaints from staff regarding their rosters. You decide to run roster writing training with the relevant staff.
- Your input can make a difference. Be aware of situations that are likely to result in conflict and take the steps necessary to improve existing practices.

Prevent these situations from occurring again

The following are some examples of common complaints and problems that cause conflict. See if you can match the improvement or enhancement that could be made to prevent the problem from occurring again.



Click and drag the conflict situation to the relevant improvement or enhancement?

Customers complain about fees they are charged when they amend a booking.	Review your refund, amendment and cancellation policy.
Coffee is often returned with complaints that it is cold.	Train staff on coffee-making procedures.
Recent changes to computer software have meant delays in customers receiving service.	Notify customers of new software and advise them to allow extra time for service.
There is an increase in claims to HR about perceived discrimination.	Review your anti-discrimination policy and retrain staff.
There is an increase in mistakes with supplier orders resulting in conflict with suppliers.	Review your ordering system and procedures.

End of section

You have reached the end of section 3.

Click to the next screen to read the unit summary.

Summary

Congratulations on reaching the end of the unit!



Click on Zoe for a summary.

Never underestimate the damage potential conflict can cause. Be aware of your surroundings at all times and react swiftly to any potential situations that may escalate and cause damage to property, or threaten the personal safety of customers or colleagues. Being aware of the stages of conflict will help you to assess potential conflict situations and prevent them reaching the crisis point.

Make sure you continually build on your conflict resolution and communication skills. Conflict doesn't have to be viewed negatively. It can be a great source of innovation and self-improvement. Treat conflict as an opportunity to learn and congratulations on completing the unit! See you in the workplace.

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Glossary

Word	Meaning
Duty of care	Your legal responsibility to take reasonable care to ensure that your actions don't cause harm to others.
Escalating	Increasing rapidly, becoming more intense or serious.
Grievance	The term used to describe an employee complaint. Workplaces must have a clear grievance procedure in place.
Jargon	A technical term that is particular to an occupation or social group.
Mediation	A dispute resolution process that uses a third person to help two parties settle a difficult conflict situation.
Slang	Informal words or phrases particular to a language or culture.
Union	A membership organisation that represents the rights of workers in employment or industrial relations issues.
VIP	Very Important Person. This could be a regular guest, government official, celebrity, or any other guest your company deems important to their business.
WHS	Workplace Health and Safety.



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