

Conflict Continuum and Conflict Resolution Principles

Last update: 8/28/26

Conflict Continuum¹

The Conflict Continuum provides a way to understand how to react to conflict, from disagreements to very dysfunctional interactions. Not all conflict is alike or should be treated in the same way. The list of factors below the Continuum provides additional description that may be helpful. For example, longstanding conflicts between groups that involve many people and many issues which will be much harder to manage than a disagreement between two people.

Productive conflict

Disagreements occur. People talk through them respectfully. Interactions may be emotional, but these are manageable and productive. New ideas may emerge.

Mild conflict

Disagreements are somewhat emotional and personal, but people work through them with some effort. People may describe this as a conflict, but not seek help to manage it.

Strong conflict

Disagreements result in heightened emotions that may feel unmanageable. Parties may feel personally attacked. Parties would clearly describe this as a conflict. Other people notice the conflict.

Dysfunctional conflict

Parties avoid or attack each other. The conflict clearly affects personal and/or workplace productivity and health.



¹ This continuum is not necessarily linear. Note that people may experience a combination of types of conflicts depending on the relationships and issues present.

Conflict Resolution Principles

Conflict:

- is the perceived incompatibility of interests, needs, or goals or any place two or more people are stuck;
- is a normal and unavoidable aspect of human interaction, but being stuck in conflict with no way out is not healthy and warrants deeper problem-solving;
- exists along a continuum from small, nonconfrontational behaviors to unproductive, dysfunctional conflict. While conflict doesn't always progress in a linear way, the continuum model can help you assess the issues you are dealing with and tailor your approach to solutions.

Productive, functional conflict:

- can be an opportunity for growth and change;
- can be used to strengthen relationships;
- can improve team creativity and innovation.

Unproductive, dysfunctional conflict:

- takes time away from productive pursuits;
- can affect physical and emotional health;
- can get worse over time, if not resolved.

Resolving conflict:

- should be done as early as possible in a conflict;
- is easier to do with a problem-solving mindset;
- requires skill, patience, persistence, and a sense of hope about resolution;
- takes multiple tools used simultaneously, especially when conflict is long-standing and complex.

Conflict intervention

- **For productive conflict**, provide structure and support for relationship-/team-building so that differences of opinion, communication style, background, or worldview are viewed positively rather than as a source of more serious conflict.
- **For mild conflict**, coach people or reflect yourself on how to ask good questions and use a problem-solving mindset. Be patient and intentional and ensure that parties are curious about solutions.
- **For strong conflict**, invite parties into a facilitated conversation, preferably using a neutral third-party.
- **For dysfunctional conflict**, immediately design ways to interrupt the conflict using multiple tools (e.g., HR involvement, facilitated dialogue, revised employee expectations) and identify and address root causes.² Dysfunctional conflict involves patterns of behavior. It is important to interrupt those patterns.

² If the conflict is in the workplace, resolution will be more effective when there are clear roles and responsibilities, fair processes, inclusive leadership practices, and transparent decision-making. Persistent, dysfunctional workplace conflict may be the visible symptom of unclear or uncommunicated processes and systems or structures that don't support the work system. Each situation is unique. It is important to consult your local HR experts for guidance and support.