

# Quick Skills Series

## HANDLING CONFLICT

*How to Resolve Workplace Tensions*



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*How to Resolve Workplace Tensions*



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# Quick Skills Series

## Handling Conflict

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# Quick Skills Series

Expand your professional career skills by combining several *Quick Skills* books into your own customized learning plan.

## *Skills for the First-Time Supervisor*

New supervisors face similar challenges. While used to being responsible for their own efforts, they often feel nervous about being judged by the work of those under their supervision. This quick, preparatory course focuses on key concepts and abilities.

## *Customer Service*

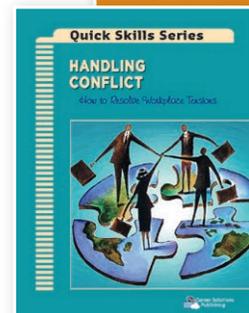
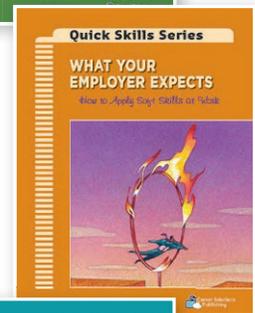
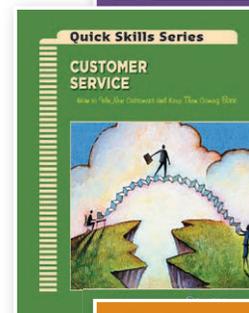
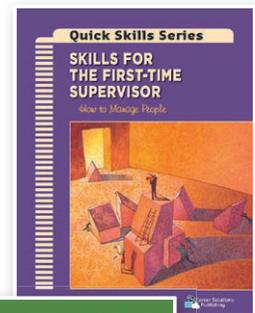
Putting the customer first is how you keep current customers and entice new ones to use your company's products or services. Giving customers what they want, increasing customer loyalty, and eliminating customer dissatisfaction is the focus of this book.

## *What Your Employer Expects*

Starting out strong is important for any newly-hired employee, and enhancing your skills, behaviors, and attitudes that employers want is the key to long-term success. You will learn strategies and receive recommendations and guidelines to assist in this process.

## *Handling Conflict*

Understanding why conflict arises and how to better manage it is a skill that can be learned; however, the process requires understanding oneself and others. With this book, you will cultivate the skills necessary for handling conflict in an effective and constructive manner.



Watch for these upcoming *Quick Skills Series* books

- Entrepreneurship Skills • Decision Making and Problem Solving
- Teamwork • Managing Change • Self-Management and Goal Setting
- Attitude and Self-Esteem • Advancing Your Career

# Employability Skills

Employability skills, sometimes called soft skills, have become the hard skills of today's workforce. They are the power skills that differentiate exceptional employees from only adequate employees. With powerful employability skills, you will rise faster and further in your career.

Important research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center concluded that 85% of job success comes from having well-developed employability skills, and only 15% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge, previously known as the hard skills. Employers worldwide say that many applicants do not possess acceptable employability skills and, therefore, are unprepared for work in a fast-changing, technological society.

Being able to handle conflict effectively is an employability skill that is highly valued by employers. Individuals who remain objective and non-defensive during conflict, and who view debate and critical feedback as important for improving their job skills, gain the respect of their supervisors and coworkers. The ability to control one's emotions and behaviors during conflict is a significant professional asset. In this Quick Skills book *Handling Conflict*, you will learn strategies to enhance your own abilities when faced with challenging conflict in your work.

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# Handling Conflict

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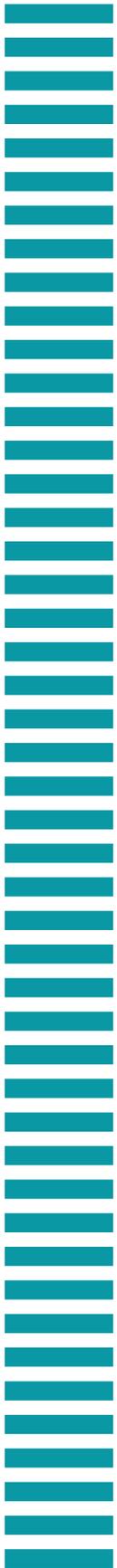
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# Handling Conflict

Conflicts are an inevitable part of life. Throughout our history on earth, we human beings have struggled with one another. Although philosophers and religious leaders have urged us to embrace peace and quiet, we continue to argue and clash—and sometimes we even seem to enjoy it.

This book is not about the major battles involved in war and politics. Rather, it is about the kinds of conflicts you experience on an almost daily basis, at work and also among your friends and family. The way you handle these conflicts can have a major impact on your success, your happiness, and your fulfillment in life. There are two basic assumptions behind this book:

1. Some ways of handling conflict are more effective than others—that is, more likely to result in positive outcomes.
2. The skills for handling conflict can be learned. Even if you're not adept at them now, you can improve through understanding and practice.

In the workshops that follow, you'll explore several different aspects of conflict and learn important skills that can help you manage conflicts effectively. You'll see how to get a handle on conflict so that it can

work to your advantage. In fact, you'll discover how to make many conflicts work to the mutual advantage of both you and your opponents.

To get a sense of your current approach to conflict, try the self-assessment on the next page. For each statement, mark the response that best applies to you.



Peace is not the absence of conflict. It is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.

— **RONALD REAGAN**  
*U.S. President*

# Introduction

To get a sense of your current approach to conflict, try this self-assessment. For each statement, mark the response that best applies to you. Don't spend a long time pondering each answer. Just choose the answer that seems most appropriate right now.

	<b>Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Never</b>
1. I'm unhappy about the conflict at my job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I'm upset when people criticize me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. People get annoyed when I give them good advice.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I find it hard to assert my own rights and opinions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. When people disagree with me, the argument gets personal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I raise my voice in arguments.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I get frustrated and angry, even though others may not know it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. In a dispute, people tell me I've misinterpreted the situation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. To avoid a fight, I just give in.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. If it comes to a showdown, I make sure I win.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. If someone shows anger toward me, I get really upset.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. When other people are fighting about something that doesn't involve me directly, I make a point of ignoring the trouble.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How many times did you check “Often” or “Sometimes”? Although there are no absolute rules that apply in every conflict, each of the twelve statements describes a response that tends to produce a negative outcome. Usually there are more productive ways to think, feel, and behave during a conflict.

In this book you'll find many suggestions and activities that can help you identify productive ways of handling conflict and put them into practice in your own life.

## Use and Abuse of Conflict

**A**mber has a big problem with Frank in Purchasing at the construction firm where they work. Recently, Amber was asked to help prepare a bid for a new city recreation center. This is an unusual project for the firm, in part because the plans call for collaborating with a local artist on mosaic tile work. To figure out the cost of the special materials, she needs Frank's help.

Frank has been with the company about 125 years, Amber supposes. He's grumpy, set in his ways, and disrespectful of young people like her. This morning, when she showed him the specifications for the tiles, he grunted, "Can't get 'em."

"What do you mean?" she retorted. "I've listed three possible sources. All you have to do is ask for prices."

"We don't deal with those places," he declared. "Besides, these specs are too vague."

"I don't have details yet. We need a ballpark estimate, that's all. And why can't we deal with new suppliers?" she questioned.

Frank rolled his eyes and ignored her.

"Listen," she snapped, "I was told I had to work with you on these costs.

If you won't cooperate, I'm going to tell the boss you're just a—" (she swallowed several nasty words) "—a giant clog in the works," she concluded.

"Oh, you go ahead and do that," he grinned. "Meanwhile, Mr. Clog's

gonna file these papers for you." And he tossed her carefully prepared specs into a wastebasket.

Since then, Amber has been fuming. Should she storm back and confront Frank? Should she inform the boss that she

can no longer work with Frank?

Should she tell her coworkers about the incident in the hope that everyone will shun him? While she weighs these options, she is too upset to get any work done.



### What's Inside

*Here, you will learn to*

- ◆ define conflict
- ◆ identify beneficial aspects of conflict
- ◆ recognize when conflict is constructive

Workshop



## What Is Conflict?

A conflict exists when one person's attempt to reach his or her goals interferes with another person's attempt to do the same. As Amber's story demonstrates, conflict can rear its head at almost any time in a work environment. It can build up over a long time, or it can flare suddenly. It may be based on genuine disagreements about the job, but it can be fueled by many other things: pressures that the individuals are feeling, frustrations, fears, personal dislikes, and more.

Amber's goal is to do her job well, and she sees her efforts being blocked by Frank, whose goal may be to prevent interference with his cherished way of doing things. As they begin to clash over goals, many negative emotions and behaviors come into play. Frank patronizes and dismisses Amber. She threatens him and calls him a name. Now the situation is getting out of hand.

Of course, conflict doesn't have to be so open or obvious. Perhaps the nastiest conflicts in organizations are the ones papered over by smiles and hearty greetings. If you feel that someone who pretends to like you is really stabbing you in the back, you're in conflict.



## Disagreement vs. Conflict

It's important to realize that mere disagreement is not conflict. Say that you advocate Plan A, and a coworker of yours advocates Plan B. At a meeting you both present your arguments; the two of you disagree strongly, maybe even loudly. This isn't necessarily conflict. It wouldn't be conflict unless one of you felt the other was blocking the achievement of a personal goal. If the dominant goal for both of you is reaching the best decision for the company, and you are both willing to accept that there are different opinions about how to proceed, you can continue to work together without conflict.



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## Personality Traits That Promote Conflict

Are there some types of people who, by their very nature, rub others the wrong way? That is, do certain personality traits make people more prone to conflict? Psychologists and organization theorists generally believe this is true. Although such personality traits are hard to identify and measure, the following characteristics, among others, seem to promote conflict:

- ◆ Authoritarian attitudes
- ◆ Arrogance
- ◆ Insistence on the truth of a belief that cannot be proved
- ◆ Strong need to control things
- ◆ Fear of uncertainty

## Did you know?

According to a survey by Accountemps, managers in major U.S. corporations spend more than four weeks a year handling problems caused by employees who can't get along with one another.

## Consequences of Conflict

What are some of the consequences of conflict in the workplace? You can probably think of several immediately. People who study organizations have described many damages caused by conflict, including these:

- ◆ Energy is diverted from important organizational goals.
- ◆ Tasks that depend on cooperation don't get done properly.
- ◆ Both parties to the conflict feel increased stress and frustration, which in turn can affect their ability to do their job.
- ◆ The "losers" in a conflict often feel demeaned or not respected, and this can affect their commitment to the organization as a whole.
- ◆ Often the conflict spreads to other people, forcing them to choose sides and poisoning many relationships throughout the organization. Morale declines, suspicion and distrust mount, and job satisfaction suffers. Absenteeism rises.
- ◆ As hostilities escalate, some people may get fired. Others may quit because they can't stand the atmosphere. In either case, turnover increases, and the organization may struggle to keep a competent and productive staff.
- ◆ Clients or customers notice that something is wrong in the organization, and they begin to take their business elsewhere.

# ACTIVITY 1.1

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

## Looking at a Conflict of Your Own

Think about a conflict you've had within the last few years, either at work or in another part of your life. Answer the following questions:

1. How did it start?

2. What emotions became involved?

Your emotions:

The other person's emotions (as you understand them):

3. Did the conflict escalate to involve other people? How and why?

4. List any negative consequences that resulted:

5. Looking back, do you think you should have handled the conflict differently? Explain your answer.