
Negotiating Your Way Out of Workplace Conflict



By Horacio Falcao , INSEAD Senior Affiliate Professor of Decision Sciences

When conflict and mistrust cause a breakdown in working relationships perhaps it's time to have “that” conversation.

Five years after obtaining an INSEAD MBA and joining the A&M Corporation, Joanna was promoted to head of the firm's Indonesian operations, making her the first person in the company's history to advance to a senior position within such a short timeframe and at such a young age. Her promotion came as a shock to Rupert, a 15-year company stalwart and its leading expert on Indonesia. Rupert had worked closely with her predecessor and believed he would be given the post. Not surprisingly he feels angered by the firm's decision and the fact that he now reports to Joanna who he thinks lacks the knowledge and experience to succeed, and may have only got the promotion by schmoozing with senior leadership.

With A&M looking to expand its holdings in Indonesia, a market with unique and complex challenges, Joanna and Rupert openly disagree on which growth strategy the company should pursue - acquisitions or organic. Communication between them has been poor, both parties doubting the other's competence, reliability and intentions. When Joanna was asked to

present her recommended strategy to the CEO she sought Rupert's input. He responded with a terse one-line memo: "I think the company should go for an organic growth strategy instead of an acquisition strategy."

Frustrated with his lack of cooperation, she decides to meet with him in person to discuss the problem between them. While Joanna may like to fire Rupert and employ a new Indonesian expert, she's aware that to do so could harm her credibility as a departmental manager, and would lose the company a valuable resource. But with the situation as it stands, is there any chance they can find the common ground for a productive working relationship?

Confronting conflict

When you enter into a negotiation thinking "I don't trust you, I don't like you, I don't think you deserve your position", it may seem there is little chance any conversation will go well. But there are many ways you can address these issues and perceptions with very positive outcomes. When entering sensitive negotiations consider these things:

- **Timing**

Don't act too soon and make sure the issue is something that needs confronting. Not every problem needs to be addressed. In some situations, an employee may be angry or frustrated over a specific problem – such as missing out on a promotion or having their ideas rejected – but, if done fairly and in caring ways, given time most people are mature enough that they will bounce back.

If this doesn't happen, and if their actions (or inactions, such as the case with Rupert) continue to impact your happiness, productivity or your working relationship, then perhaps it is time to have the conversation. When this happens the key is patience.

Walking into someone's office and saying, "We're having issues here and we need to sort it out", may catch them off guard and prompt the wrong response. They could see your approach as confrontational and take an aggressive comeback or, if they are a risk-adverse type person or a conflict-avoider, they may simply deny the problem exists. Be open to having the conversation and even initiating the conversation, but look for a culturally appropriate hint to suggest the issue is on the table and that it's okay to talk

about it. For instance they may react a little bit strongly to a comment or make conflict over something small. At this stage you might say “Well your response seems to be a bit out of proportion, there seems to be something else bothering you, shall we talk?”

- **Power**

A manager naturally has the authoritative position and the ability to fire the employee. But when addressing issues of trust they should be very careful not to resort to power moves, a wrong word or expression, even if well-meant could be taken out of context and interpreted as a threat.

- **Trust**

Often in negotiations with people who know each other, the real obstacle is not the issue at hand but the underlying relationship between the parties. In a situation where there is conflict, there is negative trust often accompanied by prejudices, preconceptions and biases. Think of ways to rebuild trust, such as sharing information about each other’s plans and experiences.

When communication starts and people begin to understand each other, it’s not unusual for them to discover the conflict in the relationship was based on misconceptions and misunderstandings. Once these are clarified a lot of broader issues can be resolved and parties can come back and look at each other, if not with total trust and care, at least with some respect and an ability to work together productively in the future.

- **Common ground**

Don’t assume points of similarity too quickly. It’s easy to give in to wishful thinking and the idea that because common ground was found on a couple of issues everything will be fine. This is one of the myths around win-win negotiations that frustrates many when it does not happen. People try to get to a place of harmony too fast and tend to brush the risk of potential conflict under the carpet when there’s still a chance it may explode.

We need to recognise that relationships need time to build and even more time to rebuild. A successful negotiation on one point is a step in the right direction, but there may be other negotiations coming up which won’t go so well.

Nurturing the working relationship

A relationship is like a chain, every negotiation is a link and, while it sounds cliché, the chain or relationship is only as strong as its weakest link. As with a marriage, it's a continuous effort. While Joanna is expected to maintain a close professional relationship with Rupert, she has to be careful to make sure the relationship goes at a proper pace. Once communication has begun she should make sure it continues, that expectations are understood and accepted and that, in her eagerness to make it work, she doesn't take too much risk too quickly.



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