

Understanding Where Conflict at Work Comes From—and How to Deal With the Stress

Conflict at work happens—a lot. And it is a major source of stress for both employees and supervisors.

It shouldn't take you but a few seconds to recall a tense moment in your workplace—to remember the discomfort of watching a not-so-friendly disagreement in a meeting. Or to relive the sting of a critical comment made in front of your colleagues.

One study found that, on average, each employee spends 2.1 hours every week (or one day per month) dealing with conflict in some way—either being directly involved in a disagreement or managing an “issue” between coworkers.

The cost of workplace conflict is huge—both to us as individuals and to our organizations. In addition to the time lost doing productive tasks while we are engaged in (or thinking about) a conflict, there is the personal cost of the stress it creates—headaches, upset stomachs, high blood pressure, loss of sleep.

My colleagues (Dr. Gary Chapman, Dr. Jennifer Thomas) and I have recently released a new book addressing conflict at work: *Making Things Right at Work: Increase Teamwork, Resolve Conflict and Build Trust* to help employees, supervisors and managers both reduce the amount of conflict which occurs and successfully manage interpersonal tensions once they occur.

Why Conflict Happens (or—Where Does It Come From?)

When tensions arise at work, the first thing we must remember is that the *behaviors displayed* are not necessarily the *actual*

problem. For example, when Robert cuts off a colleague in a meeting with a curt remark—while inappropriate, there is a deeper issue that is the real problem creating his reaction.

Let me share a few (but not all) of the sources of conflict we address more fully in the book:

- **Misunderstanding/miscommunication.** Probably the most common source of challenges in workplace interactions comes from simple misunderstanding and miscommunication.

- **Dissimilar personality and communication styles.** We need a diverse array of personality types in a work setting to avoid the dangers of “groupthink.” Since we perceive events differently and communicate our views in distinct ways, misunderstanding one another can easily occur.

- **Feeling offended or disrespected.** Our response of feeling offended or disrespected comes from the experience of not feeling treated appropriately by others. Either they did something we think they “shouldn’t have,” or they didn’t do something we think they should have.

Other sources exist: truly inappropriate actions (a leader “calling out” a team member in front of others using derogatory language), or sometimes, unintentional mistakes (hitting “reply all” to an email that includes communicating negative information about a colleague.)

Understanding the variety of potential sources of conflict helps us move beyond “right” and “wrong” thinking, and misattributing malicious motives when none existed. Additionally, being able to examine the possible source(s) of a disagreement between two team members assists us in identifying the true source of the problem (for example, a misunderstanding of their roles within a project), and leads to the ability to resolve the real issue creating the interpersonal stress. {eoa}

Paul White, Ph.D., is a psychologist, author, speaker and consultant, dedicated to “making work relationships work.” With Dr. Chapman, he is co-author of the bestselling *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*, as well as *Rising Above a Toxic Workplace* and *Sync or Swim*. He is also the author of *The Vibrant Workplace*. For more information, go to [.](#)

Read articles like this one and other Spirit-led content in our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.