



# A Healthy Outlook!

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## How to Manage Conflict at Work

### Types of Workplace Conflicts

Let us start by identifying why conflicts happen. Think about the types of conflict that happen around your workplace.

- Disagreements over turf (who should do what)
- Disagreements over policy (how things should be done)
- Conflicts of personality and style

### Common Ways of Dealing With Conflict

These are some of the ways we typically deal with conflict. Do you see yourself in any of them?

- Avoid the conflict.
- Deny the conflict; wait until it goes away.
- Change the subject.
- React emotionally; become aggressive, abusive, hysterical, or frightening.
- Find someone to blame.
- Make excuses.
- Delegate the situation to someone else.



Some of these responses are not very productive. A few are actually destructive. This is why learning to manage conflict is so important.

### Effect on Work Relationships

The workplace is a system of relationships. Relationships have many different aspects: trust, teamwork, quality, morale, self-esteem, loyalty, and respect for authority.



When conflicts are handled well, there is a positive effect on work relationships, such as increased productivity and the free expression of ideas.

### Factors That Affect How People Manage Conflict

The skills involved in managing conflict are learned behaviors. None of us is born knowing how to deal with differences of opinion, arguments, or turf wars. Some of the factors that affect how we behave in the face of conflict are as follows:

1. **Status:** People in higher-status positions are usually more likely to engage in conflict and are less likely to avoid confrontation.
2. **Company style or unwritten rules:** Some companies encour-



age conflict; others have unwritten rules that it must be contained or avoided.

3. **Gender differences:** Generally, males are encouraged to be more confrontational than females.
4. **Behavior learned in families:** In some families, conflict and confrontation are a communication style. In others, conflict always remains hidden.
5. **Behavior learned from role models:** People who have had a teacher or boss who modeled effective conflict resolution skills are more likely to develop these skills themselves.

### Skills in Resolving Conflict

No one is born knowing how to resolve conflicts. Conflict resolution is a set of skills that anyone can learn. Let us look at two important skills: active listening and conflict de-escalation skills.

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## Dispute Resolution Program

If you are having difficulty resolving a conflict at work, you might want to try mediation. The MCPS Dispute Resolution Program offers free mediation services, through the Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County, to help address workplace conflict. Call the Dispute Resolution Program at the EAP (240-314-1041) for more information or to request mediation.

# A Healthy Workplace

## Active Listening

Active listening is a valuable skill for resolving conflicts because it enables you to demonstrate that you understand what another person is saying and how he or she is feeling about it. Active listening means restating, in your own words, what the other person said.

Active listening is a way of checking whether your understanding is correct. It also demonstrates that you are listening and you are interested and concerned. These all help resolve a situation consisting of conflicting points of view.



Active listening responses have two components:

1. naming the feeling that the other person is conveying, and
2. stating the reason for the feeling.

Here are some examples of active-listening statements:

*"Sounds like you're upset about what happened at work."*

*"It seems like you're annoyed that I'm late."*

*"You sound really stumped about how to solve this problem."*

*"It makes you angry when you find errors on Joe's paperwork."*

*"Seems like you're really worried about Wendy."*

*"I get the feeling you're awfully busy right now."*



Active listening is not the same as agreement. It is a way of demonstrating that you intend to hear and understand another person's point of view.

## Benefits of Active Listening

If a person uses active listening as part of his or her communication style at work, how would that be good for resolving conflicts (i.e., what are the benefits)?

1. It feels good when another person makes an effort to understand what you are thinking and feeling. It creates good feelings about the other person and makes

you feel better about yourself.

2. Restating what you've heard, and checking for understanding, promotes better communication and produces fewer misunderstandings.
3. Responding with active listening has a calming effect in an emotional situation.

## Conflict De-escalation

Everyone has been in an argument that has escalated. Before you know it, everything is blown out of proportion. Let us think for a moment about some actions that will help you to de-escalate a conflict. In your experience, what actions

put a stop to the defend/attack spiral?

- Stick with "I" statements; avoid "you" statements.
- Avoid name-calling and put-downs ("A reasonable person could see that...").
- Soften your tone.
- Take a time-out ("Let's take a break and cool down").
- Acknowledge the other person's point of view (agreement is not necessary).
- Avoid defensive or hostile body language (rolling eyes, crossing arms in front of body, tapping foot).
- Be specific and factual; avoid generalities.

## Conflict Prevention Skills

Now that we have discussed how to resolve a conflict, here are a few ideas on how to prevent a conflict from happening:

- Bring issues out in the open before they become problems.
- Be aware of triggers and respond to them when you notice them.
- Have a process for resolving conflicts. Bring it up at a meeting and get agreement on what people should do in cases of differing viewpoints.
- Teach everyone conflict-resolution skills and expect people to use them. ■

Adapted from an article by Peter Cohen, a licensed social worker in Forest Hills, in the Therapists Newsletter. Used with permission.

As we begin a new school year, it is important to keep in mind those qualities that make for a healthy workplace. Here are some examples:

**Respect** – Respect means sensitivity to individual needs, encouragement of stakeholder's input, tolerance for different opinions, recognition of each person's right to privacy and self-determination, recognition of others' contributions, avoidance of discrimination and exploitation.

**Honesty** – Honesty in the work environment means open and accurate communication; one's behavior should match what he/she says.

**Commitment to Quality** – Commitment to quality is a moral and practical matter. It entails attention to relationships with all stakeholders, cutting waste, innovation, and caring about one's work.

**Information** – Issues related to "how to improve" rely upon access to relevant information and feedback pertaining to job-related performance.

**Empowerment** – Empowerment means, where possible, freedom from red tape and fear of making mistakes. It involves getting staff to feel strongly that what they do and what they think is important for the organization as a whole. Training is an important component of empowerment.

**Team Spirit** – The basic work unit is usually not the individual, but a series of overlapping work unit relationships. People do not work in isolation. Being on a team that one feels good about can greatly enhance morale and performance.

**Cheerleading** – Cheerful attitudes are contagious. Environments where support and encouragement are freely given foster a positive feeling about one's workplace. ■

## Financial Disaster Preparedness

If the recent ups and downs in the economy have taught us anything, it is that we all need to plan for the financially unexpected. Anyone with assets should create an easy-to-find, easy-to-understand file of financial information. Keep your data in a safe, accessible place at home, with an attorney or with a financial planner. The information can be organized in a pre-purchased kit, a school binder, or in scanned documents stored on a computer disk. According to the Financial Planning Association, this information should include the following:

- Birth, death, marriage certificates.
- Divorce decrees with all relevant settlement information.
- Location of wills, trusts, and any power of attorney information.
- Key identification numbers, including driver's license, passport, and employee identification data.
- Recent bank and brokerage statements.
- Detailed funeral and burial wishes.
- Recent medical records that may be good to have on hand if the individual is incapacitated.
- Copies of residential deeds and mortgage data.
- All insurance policy (health, disability and life) and agent contact information.
- Photocopies of credit and debit cards, front and back (displaying the individual's signature).
- Locations of all critical paper documents, stocks, and bonds.
- Information on location of safe-deposit, lockbox, and filing cabinet keys.
- Contact information for the individual's human resources department at work.
- Location of tax returns for the last three years.
- All relevant contact numbers for executors, financial advisers, trustees, guardians, attorneys, and any other pertinent individuals.
- Guidelines on what to do about orphaned pets, including set plans for who will adopt them and pay for their care.

In putting this information together, it makes sense for the individual to put himself or herself in the shoes of the people they've selected to handle things in a crisis. Since these individuals may be capable but still frazzled or upset, it is essential to make this information be simple to navigate. Also, it should be updated as often as possible. ■

**"The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work."**

**—Emile Zola  
(1840–1902)**

### Ask the EAP

**Q.** If I'm in trouble for lateness, attendance, or a work performance issue, will going to the EAP get me out of it?

**A.** If a personal problem is the cause of lateness, attendance, or a performance problem, working with the EAP on the issue can only help. However, the expectation is that you will need to improve your work performance, whether or not you participate in the EAP.

## Sleeping on the Job

According to a National Sleep Foundation survey:

- More than one half of the American workforce (51%) reports that sleepiness on the job interferes with the amount of work they complete.
- 40% of adults admit that the quality of their work suffers when they are sleepy.
- 68% of adults say sleepiness interferes with their concentration.
- 66% of adults say sleepiness makes handling job stress more difficult.
- More than two thirds of shift workers (68%) report experiencing problems sleeping.
- Nearly one out of four adults (24%) has difficulty getting up for work two or more workdays per week.
- About one third of adults would nap at work if allowed.
- More than 30% of Americans admit falling asleep behind the wheel at least once.

For information on sleep disorders and what to do about them, go to the National Sleep Foundation website at <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/>

**"Try to learn something about everything and everything about something."**

**—Thomas Henry Huxley  
(1825–1895)**



## Upcoming Events

**September 13, October 11, and November 8 –**  
**MCPS Cancer Support Group – We will be meeting on the second Monday of the month at CESC, Room 240, from 12:30–1:30 p.m. For more information, please contact Debra Tipton on Outlook or by phone at 240-314-1040.**

**September is National Sickle Cell Month**  
**Sickle Cell Disease Association of America, Inc.;**  
**231 East Baltimore Street, 8th Floor, Baltimore, MD 21202;**  
**800-421-8453. For more information on Sickle Cell Disease, go to**  
**www.sicklecelldisease.org**

**November is American Diabetes Month**  
**American Diabetes Association;**  
**1701 North Beauregard Street; Alexandria, VA 22311**  
**800-DIABETES (800-342-2383); 703-549-1500.**  
**For more information on diabetes, go to www.diabetes.org**

**October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.**  
**Domestic violence touches the lives of Americans of all ages, leaving a devastating impact on women, men, and children of every background and circumstance. A family’s home becomes a place of fear, hopelessness and desperation when a woman is battered by her partner, a child witnesses the abuse of a loved one, or a senior is victimized by family members. If you are concerned about the welfare of a family member, a friend or a colleague, call the Employee Assistance Program 240-314-1040 or the Montgomery County Abused Persons Program (APP) weekdays at 240-777-4195 and 24 hours at 240-777-4673. The APP provides emergency shelter for victims fleeing abuse as well as counseling services for individuals who have been abused by their partners, children exposed to domestic violence, and for those who have been abusive. In addition, the program provides information about, and assistance in seeking, legal protections available to victims and their children.**

**SAFETY ALERT: If you are in danger, please call 911, the APP, or the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 or TTY 1-800-787-3224.**

**National Depression Screening Day 2010**  
**National Depression Screening Day is Thursday, Oct. 7. As part of that event, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) will be conducting free screenings for depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder and post traumatic stress disorder. The screenings take less than 30 minutes and are available for MCPS employees and immediate family members. Appointments are available from 9 a.m.– 4:30 p.m. by appointment at the EAP offices, 2096 Gaither Road, Suite 205, in Rockville. Call the EAP at 240-314-1040 for questions or to schedule an appointment.**



### *A Healthy Outlook!*

*To help employees with troubling issues before they become overwhelming.*



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE

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Important Notice: Information in *A Healthy Outlook!* is for general information purposes only and is not intended to replace the counsel or advice of a qualified health professional. For further questions or help with specific problems or personal concerns, contact your employee assistance professional.

You may contact us or send your questions and comments to  
[Debra\\_Tipton@mcpsmd.org](mailto:Debra_Tipton@mcpsmd.org)

Please note that e-mail is not necessarily confidential.

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