

# Pistols at 10 paces?

Resolving workplace conflicts can be a win-win. **Interviewed by Chelan David**

**A** certain amount of conflict at the workplace is inevitable. After all, many Americans spend more time with their coworkers than their families. And no matter what type of organization, there is bound to be a diverse collection of goals, strategies, habits and ideologies on display. The key to ensuring harmony is acknowledging conflict and understanding the underlying reasons for why these disputes have risen. This is where the practice of conflict resolution comes into play.

“To be successful in conflict resolution, it is important to realize how you usually respond to situations when wishes, goals or interests differ,” says Yael Hellman, a professor in organizational leadership at Woodbury University.

*Smart Business* spoke with Hellman about the driving forces behind conflict in the workplace, why conflict resolution can be an effective tool and when an outside facilitator should be used.

## What is conflict resolution?

Conflict is when one person’s wishes differ from those of another. Conflict resolution, in its simplest term, is getting what you need without stepping on others. The ideal goal is to get to a win-win situation or solution.

## What are some of the typical reasons for conflict in the workplace?

Conflict in the workplace may occur when people feel stressed, hassled, overworked or do not feel that they are acknowledged or compensated appropriately. Other reasons include perceived inequities, change and innovation. Change may include any change in status quo in regard to schedules, management, leadership, policies, etc.

## How can a business use conflict resolution to address discord?

Businesses that use conflict resolution successfully generally follow these competencies for managing the conflict:



**Yael Hellman**  
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- Begin with a positive overture.
- Identify the correct definition of the problem.
- Understand the critical ingredients of collaborative thinking.
- Use open communication to resolve the challenges of change.
- Offer tools and assistance, such as mentoring or open-door policies, that best deal with the tensions and pressures that accompany change.
- Have the ability to listen to conflict and provide appropriate feedback.
- Remember that conflict isn’t always negative.

## When can conflict be good for an organization?

Whether a conflict is good or bad depends on the type of conflict. In fact, conflict is sometimes encouraged because a harmonious, peaceful, tranquil and coop-

erative workplace may become static, apathetic and nonresponsive to the needs of change and innovation. Some leaders suggest that a minimal level of conflict should be maintained — just enough to keep the workplace alive, self-critical and creative.

## Why is conflict resolution effective in resolving disputes?

Conflict resolution helps to diffuse potentially explosive situations by understanding human driving forces. These are the basic needs of being valued by others, to be in control and the need for personal self-esteem. With conflict resolution, both parties are heard without judgment or being discounted. Trust is built, information is shared and communication is enhanced. When employees feel they are being heard and acknowledged, then motivation, production and job satisfaction increase.

## In what instances should an outside facilitator be brought in?

The intensity of a conflict is generally measured by the type of conflict:

An issue is a mild conflict that may often be resolved informally by the parties involved.

A dispute is a conflict that can become polarized when the issue has a history and the parties are entrenched on both sides. It may take a mediator to help resolve this type of dispute. The mediator may include trained human resource or management personnel. Sometimes, if a big conflict cannot be solved, it’s beneficial to find out if there is a small area within the larger issue that can be resolved.

An impasse is a conflict with a fairly long history and the parties have created a mythology of hate to keep the sides polarized. It usually takes a mediator or an arbitrator from outside the organization to help resolve this type of conflict.

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