

MANAGING CONFLICT

10 Practical Tips for clearer, calmer conversations



A straightforward guide to recognising conflict early, lowering the temperature and finding a workable way forward.

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Conflict is not the problem. Unmanaged conflict is.

Conflict is a normal part of working and living with other people. It becomes costly when concerns are left unspoken, conversations are avoided, positions harden and trust begins to erode.

By the time an issue reaches formal complaint, resignation or relationship breakdown, the real cost has often been accumulating for months: lost time, lower engagement, stress, absenteeism and poorer decisions.

The goal is not to eliminate disagreement. It is to
build the confidence and practical skill to
address it early, calmly and constructively.

How to use this guide

Choose the tip that best matches the issue in front of you. Use the practical move at the bottom of each page as a small next step. You do not need to solve everything in one conversation - you do need to begin well.

A useful question to keep nearby: What does a constructive next step look like from here?

Spot it early.

Most conflicts do not appear overnight. They build through small moments that are ignored, repeated or misunderstood.

Notice the early signals

Changes in tone, withdrawal, repeated misunderstandings, missed handovers, gossip or unusually defensive responses can all be signals that something needs attention.

Go early, not heavy

An early conversation can be curious and light: check what you have noticed before deciding what it means. Early action gives people more room to repair the issue without losing face.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Name the change you have noticed and ask an open question before the pattern becomes the problem.

Create the pause.

When people feel threatened, the brain prioritises protection. The pause creates enough space to move from reaction to choice.

Regulate yourself first

Slow your breathing, lower your voice and relax your posture. A calm presence makes it easier for the other person to regain access to their own thinking.

Do not confuse speed with progress

A short break, a glass of water or a moment of silence can prevent a conversation from becoming a contest. Pausing is not avoiding; it is making the conversation safer.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Before responding, ask yourself: What outcome do I want from my next sentence?

Listen to understand.

People become more able to hear another perspective after they feel their own experience has been genuinely heard.

Listen for meaning

Pay attention to what matters underneath the words: fairness, respect, certainty, autonomy, recognition or safety. These interests often matter more than the stated position.

Check, do not assume

Paraphrase what you think you heard and invite correction. Understanding is not agreement; it is an accurate picture of the other person's point of view.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Try: Have I understood you correctly that the main concern is...?

Name the issue clearly.

Vague language creates vague conflict. Clear, neutral language helps people focus on what can actually change.

Describe behaviour, not character

Use observable facts and specific examples. Replace labels such as 'difficult' or 'unprofessional' with what was said, done or not done.

Explain the impact

Connect the behaviour to its effect on work, people or outcomes. This keeps the conversation grounded and reduces the temptation to argue about motives.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Use this structure: When [specific behaviour] happens, the impact is [specific effect].

Separate the person from the problem.

When people feel personally attacked, they defend themselves. When the issue is placed between the parties, they can work on it together.

Be firm on the issue

Respect does not require you to minimise a serious concern. You can be clear about standards, boundaries and consequences while treating the person with dignity.

Stay curious about intention

You can see behaviour but you cannot reliably see intention. Ask what was happening for the person rather than presenting your interpretation as fact.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Shift from You are the problem to We need to address this problem.

Reframe blame into needs.

Blame looks backwards for fault. Reframing keeps the concern visible while opening a path towards resolution.

Translate the message

Behind criticism is often an unmet need. 'You never tell me anything' may contain a need for timely information, inclusion or certainty.

Change the direction

Move the conversation from problems to solutions, positions to interests and certainty about the past to choice about the future.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Ask: What would you need to see happening differently from now on?

Ask better questions.

The quality of a conflict conversation often turns on the quality of the questions being asked.

Open the story

Use open questions to learn what happened, what matters and what the person is concerned may happen next. Avoid questions that are really accusations in disguise.

Test the future

Reality-testing questions help people consider consequences without being told what to do. This protects autonomy while encouraging more balanced decisions.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Try: If nothing changes, what do you think the impact will be three months from now?

Set respectful boundaries.

Constructive conflict needs both empathy and accountability. Understanding behaviour does not mean accepting behaviour that causes harm.

Make the boundary specific

State what is required, why it matters and what you will do if the behaviour continues. Keep the focus on standards and choices, not punishment.

Be consistent

A boundary that changes under pressure creates uncertainty. Follow through calmly and proportionately, while leaving room for repair.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Use: I am willing to continue this conversation when we can both speak respectfully.

Lock in agreements.

A positive conversation is not yet an outcome. Clarity about who will do what, and by when, turns goodwill into action.

Make it concrete

Clarify responsibilities, expectations, timeframes and how progress will be checked. If a point is important, do not leave it as an implied understanding.

Confirm shared meaning

Ask each person to describe what they understand has been agreed. Different interpretations are easier to fix now than after another breach.

PRACTICAL MOVE: Finish with: What exactly have we each agreed to do next, and when will we review it?

Know when to get help.

Some conflicts need a skilled, impartial person to help participants slow down, be heard and assess realistic options.

Do not wait for crisis

Mediation, coaching and facilitated conversations are often most effective before formal positions harden or relationships break down completely.

Choose the right support

Use mediation when parties need help negotiating an outcome, coaching when one person needs preparation or perspective, and training when the broader capability gap affects a team.

PRACTICAL MOVE: If the same conversation keeps producing the same result, change the process - not just the words.

A seven-question preparation checklist.

A few minutes of preparation can help you stay calm, speak clearly and keep the conversation focused on a workable next step.

01	What happened - in observable, neutral language?
02	What impact is the issue having on people or work?
03	What might be important to each person?
04	What outcome do I want from the conversation?
05	What do I need to hear before I respond?
06	What clear request, boundary or agreement is needed?
07	How and when will we review what happens next?

Remember: prepare your purpose, not a script. Leave room to learn something new.

Turn the difficult conversation into a clearer way forward.

Andrew Brayne is the founder of Mediation Mastery and a nationally accredited mediator, facilitator, trainer and coach with more than 35 years of dispute resolution experience.

His work brings together practical mediation skill, organisational experience and a deeply human approach. He helps people address issues early, understand what is driving conflict and turn insight into clear action.

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Start a confidential conversation

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