

Three Good Reasons To Ignore Conflict (And The Price You'll Pay)

If you work with people, you will experience conflict. Resolving it probably wasn't mentioned in your job description and you can always find better things to do than deal with it. Yet despite your hope that it will go away, it hangs around like an unwanted relative who has overstayed his welcome. Many of the reasons people give for avoiding conflict turn out to be myths – with a price tag attached.

Reason #1: It's not that big a deal – it will sort itself out.

While some squabbles evaporate, most conflicts don't. Quite the opposite, they either escalate and erupt or fester and go underground ("buried, but not dead"). The resulting tension and negativity are palpable in a workplace and can spawn a toxic environment.

This reasoning also underestimates the cost of conflict to an organization. Unresolved conflict results in wasted time, poor decisions, turnover and retraining, absenteeism, health costs (stress leave) and even litigation. It also takes an emotional toll on those directly involved and even on those indirectly affected by it. Like it or not, conflict *is* a big deal in organizations.

Reason #2: They're grownups - they should be able to sort it out themselves.

From the outside, a conflict may seem simple to resolve, yet it's hard to see the picture when you're inside the frame. Years of experience as a mediator showed me that capable and well-intentioned people feel trapped and powerless in conflict. They benefit immensely when someone can help surface the conflict and provide a safe space to explore and resolve it. There is no shame in struggling with conflict. Managers and even co-workers can play a pivotal role in shifting confrontation to resolution.

Reason #3: Dealing with it will only make it worse.

You can't have conflict resolution without acknowledging the conflict. When conflict is ignored or suppressed, it simply morphs into other forms (gossip, backbiting, cliques). Addressing it may surface emotions with which you are uncomfortable, but this discomfort soon passes. Often, the apprehension about raising an issue is far worse than the conversation itself. On the flip side, conflict can be the catalyst for creative solutions, positive change and even improved relationships.

Sometimes it may be right to ignore a conflict – when you make a strategic choice based on your assessment of the seriousness of the situation and the ramifications of ignoring it. But more often than not, avoidance stems from fear (of confrontation, of looking incompetent, of being disliked). Rather than acknowledge that fear, people find reasons to justify inaction.

When conflict arises (as it most surely will), be honest with yourself. Acknowledge your discomfort and examine your reasons for inaction. Instead of seeking reasons not to deal with the conflict, consider the following reasons to involve yourself:

- the discomfort will seldom be as unpleasant as you fear it will be
- workplace tension will diminish; morale will improve
- you will prevent minor issues from escalating, saving time and energy in the long run
- you will regain peace of mind
- those involved and affected by it will once again be able to apply their energy to the job at hand.

With conflict, the temporary discomfort of addressing it will pay dividends in the long run – both financially and emotionally. As the commercial for Fram Oil Filters says, “you can pay me now or pay me later”.