

# Why and How to Manage Workplace Conflict

Creating Productive Team Through Performance Assessments and Coaching

*Helping Organizations Succeed By Helping Their People Succeed*



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Conflict in the Workplace ..... 3**
  - A Drain on Productivity and Organizational Performance..... 3
  - What’s the Cost? ..... 3
  - What’s the Cause? ..... 3
  - Effects of Workplace Conflict..... 4
  - Who is Responsible for Managing Conflict? ..... 4
- Case Study – the Presenting problem ..... 5**
- Interventions: Coaching and Assessments ..... 6**
  - The Role of the Coach ..... 6
  - The Role of Assessments in Managing Conflict ..... 7
  - The Everything DiSC® Productive Conflict Profile ..... 7
  - Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) ..... 7
  - Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) ..... 7
- Case Study – the Outcomes ..... 8**
  - Leader Assessment Results ..... 8
  - The Coach Role..... 9
  - How Executive Coaching Improves Performance ..... 10
- Recommended Reading and References ..... 10**
  - The Costs ..... 10
  - The Causes ..... 10
  - Books..... 10

# CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

## A Drain on Productivity and Organizational Performance

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, and the workplace is no exception. It is so prevalent, in fact, that April has now been designated Workplace Conflict Awareness Month.

### What's the Cost?

Michael Lazan's 2015 whitepaper *The Financial Cost of Conflict in Organizations* suggests that a single conflict involving six, \$100K salaried employees, would cost a company \$255,000 annually assuming it lasted all year and consumed 10% of the time. His calculation included four quantifiable symptoms of conflict such as wasted time, reduced ROI on labor costs, poor decisions resulting from power struggles, and employee attrition. Other significant costs including restructuring, employee sabotage or theft, and lost productivity resulting from employee absence or reduced motivation were ignored for the purposes of this hypothetical calculation.

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*“Some symptoms of conflict are more difficult to quantify than others, but we can put price tags on just about all of them, albeit with varying degrees of precision.” — Michael Lazan*

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Stress can also harm the bottom line. Stress-related illnesses can inflate healthcare costs as employees seek treatment for unresolved work issues, as well as legal fees from disgruntled employees who have legitimate grievances or are trying to “get even” with a company that refused to effectively manage conflict.

Because workplace conflict has a significant hidden financial impact and drain on workplace productivity and morale, organizations must find ways to effectively deal with conflict.

### What's the Cause?

In separate articles written by psychologists Art Bell and Brett Hart, eight common causes of conflict in the workplace have been identified:

- |                            |                              |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1) Conflicting resources   | 5) Conflicting pressures     |
| 2) Conflicting styles      | 6) Conflicting roles         |
| 3) Conflicting perceptions | 7) Different personal values |
| 4) Conflicting goals       | 8) Unpredictable policies    |

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*Many reasons are cited as causes for workplace conflict, but the root cause of team conflict is the inherent differences in how people are wired—their core personalities.*

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While reasons like these are often cited as causes for workplace conflict, the root cause of team conflict is the inherent differences in how people are wired—their core personalities.

Conflict occurs when people find themselves at odds but are not equipped to get to the bottom of the conflict. The initial conflict between two people can also cause difficulties among the people who report to them; how do you follow people who can't get along? Team trust and enthusiasm can be broken, and the end result is costly and reduces morale and performance.



### Effects of Workplace Conflict

Just as in any setting, conflict has a negative effect on productivity and morale. Aside from the far-reaching financial consequences already outlined, absenteeism and turnover, poor cultures, project overruns and failures, and even physical violence can result from a tense or toxic work environment.

The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine reports approximately 50% higher incidents of absenteeism in work environments that are perceived as highly stressful due to conflict. The Consulting Psychology Press (CPP) report found that roughly one in three U.S. workers say that conflict has led to personal injury or attacks, while one in five report that it has led to illness or absence from work.

Pollack Peacebuilding is compiling a list of workplace conflict statistics, including employment lawsuit and employee engagement data, all of which points to a business imperative to address workplace conflict.

### Who is Responsible for Managing Conflict?

If conflicts were easy to resolve, the phrase “conflict management” would not exist. But conflicts are often hard to sort out—so who is going to manage them? Whose responsibility is it?

By the time a corporate officer learns of a conflict, it's because the leaders involved have not been able to resolve their differences and the conflict has escalated. The officer will often pass the conflict management buck back to the executives mistakenly assuming that since the two involved are intelligent adults they should be able to “figure it out” themselves. But at this point, it should be clear that the two do not have the necessary skill set to overcome the conflict. Alternately, the officer may identify more with one of the executives involved and fuel the conflict further with partiality.

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*“Poor conflict engagement skills in an organization's leaders often means poorly managed conflict throughout the system. . .”  
For the sake of the teams involved, it is the responsibility of the executives and their boss to find ways to manage conflict.” — Tammy Lenski*

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[Tammy Lenski](#), Ed.D, writes in her article, [“Conflict at Work: The Root Causes of Workplace Conflict Are Often Systemic”](#), that employees

demonstrate through word and action the unofficial policy of “how we deal with conflict here,” which can have a significant impact on whether conflict unfolds in a healthy or destructive way. “

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## CASE STUDY – THE PRESENTING PROBLEM

The following excerpts are from a real-life workplace conflict that we were engaged to address on behalf of a client organization. It illustrates a very common scenario and the conflict management coaching process.

*Two vice presidents support the same function on a leadership team for our client. Mark is described as conflict averse and feels that Bob is too critical. Bob is described as transparent and openly dismissive of the value of “soft” skills. There have been contentious exchanges between the two, with no regard for how the other felt.*

*Mark doesn't trust Bob and feels Bob has broken their trust in the past. He feels that Bob doesn't really listen to what's being said, and therefore doesn't value the input provided. This is demonstrated by Bob responding in a defensive, condescending manner that is interpreted as “it's done—I've already made up my mind.” Mark in turn feels “dismissed” and “terrible” about himself, which in turn causes him to back down. Bob is aware of the frustration in his voice; he gets louder and finds himself saying things without considering the impact of his words.*

*Bob and Mark have tried but don't do an effective job of resolving their differences. Mark shuts down by taking Bob's attitude personally, and his own tendency is to avoid confrontation. Bob realizes that his frustration with Mark “triggers” his behavior of showing impatience, yet he is having difficulty changing.*

*Our client wants to maintain high morale and not let Bob and Mark's conflict get in the way of organizational priorities. The company wants them to communicate the same messages and not allow their personal difficulties impact their respective teams.*

*Bob and Mark are ideal candidates for coaching because they are both high achievers who fill vital roles in the company and are therefore difficult to replace.*

*It behooves their employer to provide resources to address their conflict. Additionally, both individuals are willing to work on the problem. Coaching won't work for people who are not willing to work through a difficult situation. Bob and Mark's boss suggested bringing in an external executive coach to help the two work through their challenges. Committed to finding a better way to manage conflicts, Bob and Mark welcomed this approach.*

## INTERVENTIONS: COACHING AND ASSESSMENTS

### The Role of the Coach

There are many benefits in bringing a coach into a conflict situation. An external executive coach:

- Has expertise in human behavior
- Is an objective observer from outside the organization
- Can pinpoint the root issues underlying conflict
- Creates an individualized action plan for managing conflict
- Follows up to support sustainability

Coaching is not about trying to change people's inherent personalities or make everyone "nice." When an executive coach comes into a conflict situation, the goal is to diagnose the root cause of the problem and provide those involved with insight and with skills to more effectively manage conflict.

To accomplish these goals, a coaching engagement will typically consist of three core elements:

- 1) **An interview** with the client and organization to better understand the background of the conflict and why coaching is needed
- 2) **Assessments** to give the coach and the client the information needed to provide a deeper understanding of the issues
- 3) **A development plan** for the client(s) to successfully manage the conflict and put their new skills into practice.



## The Role of Assessments in Managing Conflict

The goal of an executive coach is to get to the root of the conflict. Assessments can give the coach information on each person's manner of managing and resolving conflict. The coach then uses the assessment results to understand how each person's personality may work with or against the other person.

Coaches have many assessment options at their disposal, depending on what they want to assess: competency, intelligence, motivation, behavior, etc.

Where conflict coaching is required, The Everything DiSC® Productive Conflict Profile, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) are popular choices because, as noted earlier, personality differences lie at the root of conflict.

## The Everything DiSC® Productive Conflict Profile

This Profile provides focused data to help people change their response to conflict by:

- Gaining insights into their own response to conflict and that of others
- Exploring the destructive and productive conflict behaviors typical of each DiSC style
- Understanding how to manage their response to conflict situations
- Reframing the language you use when approaching potential conflict
- Discovering communication strategies for engaging in productive workplace conflict

## Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)

The TKI gives people a heightened awareness of their conflict management styles and how those styles affect interpersonal and group interactions. It describes five conflict-handling “modes” and offers strategies for when to use each of them.

## Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

The MBTI is a personality assessment designed to measure preferences in how people perceive and make decisions. The MBTI categorizes these preferences into four categories or “dichotomies”:

Thinking or Feeling, Sensing or iNtuiting, Introverting or Extraverting, and Judging or Perceiving. This yields 16 possible personality types (INFJ, etc.—see sidebar), the description of which can help people better understand themselves and those around them.

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*“Type theory expresses the view that each of the 16 personality types has a unique set of strengths or resources that are derived from the specific way in which the particular type processes information and makes decisions. The second assumption is knowledge of individual differences in personality type can help reduce conflict by redirecting potential sources of misunderstanding. Through knowledge and understanding of type preferences when conflict does occur, blaming and other negative elements of conflict can be managed.”*  
— Paladin Associates

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## CASE STUDY – THE OUTCOMES

After the initial meetings with Mark and Bob, the coach determined that using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) would be appropriate in this particular case.

### Leader Assessment Results

This data provides insight about:

- Each person’s preferences for how they gather information, make decisions, handle conflict, communicate, etc.
- The impact of each person’s style on the other person when they interact
- Similarities and differences between both people

Assessment	Bob	Mark
The Everything DiSC® Productive Conflict Profile revealed style/ preferred conflict-handling style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bob’s DiSC style is <b>Dominant (D)</b> and his preferred conflict-handling style is <b>Control and Assertion</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mark’s DiSC style is <b>Steady (S)</b> and his preferred conflict-handling style is <b>Harmony and Reassurance</b></li> </ul>
The TKI revealed preferred conflict-handling style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bob's preferred conflict-handling style is <b>Avoiding</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mark's preferred conflict-handling style is <b>Collaborating</b></li> </ul>
The MBTI revealed personality type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bob’s MBTI Type is <b>ISTJ</b>: Tends to think before he speaks. He has already arrived at the solution he desires and can dig in his heels to get what he thinks is rights. He also relates well to data and details.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mark’s MBTI Type is <b>ENFJ</b>: Talks things out; he is a “big picture” person and is more focused on the personal values and the people involved in the situation. He takes a longer time to arrive at decisions.</li> </ul>

**Bob and Mark’s Boss – ESTJ:** Similar to Bob, but extraverted, so people know what she’s thinking. She is a results-oriented driver.

## The Coach Role

The coach debriefed each leader’s assessment results individually. Each person gained self-awareness. The coach then brought both parties together and revisited, step by step, an actual conflict they have had.

Each became more aware of how their own behavior affects the other person, and why the other person reacts as they do. The next step was to develop strategies to successfully interact with that person in the future.

The coach helped each person create and write down these strategies, and then put them into practice. The two parties met periodically with their coach to measure progress.

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*“Training that contains a component on understanding individual differences, for example using psychometrics, provides client-facing staff with the insight that makes for lasting behavior change, rather than just a short-term cosmetic impact.” —CPP, Inc.*

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*The coach met with Bob and Mark individually, then together. Each had an “aha” moment as they discovered how their behavior affected the other person. The coach discussed tactics for managing their specific areas of conflict and instructed them to keep a journal. Through journaling, Bob was able to identify specific times when Mark’s behaviors triggered his own reactions of annoyance.*

*The coach also realized that Bob and Mark’s boss was contributing to the problem by tending to identify with Bob, whose personality is very similar to hers. The boss became aware of the problem and used the coach’s suggestions to change that dynamic. Bob now feels comfortable having conversations with Mark. He sees a big decrease in tension and feels Mark is more of a friend than just a co-worker. Mark also reports that there is no more underlying tension. He says Bob is very approachable and that he’s not apprehensive about approaching him now.*

*Both feel significant progress has been made. They are trying to form an alliance when they approach their boss and be more supportive of each other. They resolve differences in a way that supports the business.*



## How Executive Coaching Improves Performance

As Bob and Mark's real-life example illustrates, coaching can be a valuable service to help executives overcome workplace conflict. A key component of the coaching process is the use of assessments, which can help the coach understand the ways clients manage and resolve conflict. Then the clients get insight about themselves and their co-workers and acquire tools to manage conflict in ways that create harmony and encourage productivity.

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## RECOMMENDED READING AND REFERENCES

### The Costs

- [The Financial Cost of Conflict in Organizations](#) (2015) Michael Lazan, Arbinger
- [What is Conflict Costing Your Organization?](#) The MTI Measure of Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict (**Conflict Cost Calculator**) gives you a closer look at the monetary costs of conflict. This eye-opening, online calculator produces an in-depth estimate of the hidden financial cost of conflict to your organization. The calculator evaluates nine cost factors influenced by conflict that directly impact your bottom line.
- [Conflict Resolution in the Workplace + Workplace Conflict Statistics](#). Pollack Peacebuilding is currently running a global workplace conflict study to augment the statistics below.

### The Causes

- [Bell and Hart's Eight Causes of Conflict](#). Understanding the Causes of Workplace Tension. Use Mindtools resource to identify possible causes of conflict.
- [Conflict at Work: The Root Causes of Workplace Conflict Are Often Systemic](#) by Tammy Lenski, Ed.D

### Books

- [The Conflict Pivot: Turning Conflict into Peace of Mind](#) by Tammy Lenski (2014) Paperback
- [Managing Conflict: A Practical Guide to Resolution in the Workplace](#) by David Liddle (2017)