



ETHOS HANDBOOK

PROJECT OUTPUT N.8

HOW TO MANAGE COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICTS IN SMES

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PARTNERS

IRSA – INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND STRATEGIC ANALYSES – Slovenia

Contact: Katja Begelj
Address: Dunajska cesta, 113 – Ljubljana
Web: www.institut-irsa.si
E-mail: irsa@institut-irsa.si

TUCEP - TIBER UMBRIA COMETT EDUCATION PROGRAMME – Italy

Contact: Maria Brizi
Address: Piazza dell'Università 1 – Perugia
Web: www.tucep.org – E-mail: tucep@tucep.org

CENTRO PSICOPEDAGOGICO PER LA PACE E LA GESTIONE DEI CONFLITTI – Italy

Contact: Paolo Ragusa
Address: Via Campagna n.83 – Piacenza
Web: www.cppp.it – E-mail: info@cppp.it

PROVINCIA DI PERUGIA – Italy

Contact: Bruno Palazzetti
Address: Piazza Italia, 11 – Perugia
Web: www.provincia.perugia.it
E-mail: daniela.grilli@provincia.perugia.it

ASOCIACION CULTURAL EUROACCION – Spain

Contact: Diego Marin
Address: Calle Capitán Balaca, 12 – Murcia
Web: www.euroaccion.com
E-mail: diego@euroaccion.com

ITPIO – INSTITUTE FOR TRAINING OF PERSONNEL IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS – Bulgaria

Contact: Ludmil Kovachev
Address: Skobelev blvd, 42 – Sofia
Web: www.itpio.eu – E-mail: lkovachev@itpio.eu

WYŻSZA SZKOŁA BIZNESU I NAUK O ZDROWIU – Poland

Contact: Monika Łuczak
Address: Piotrkowska, 268 – Lodz
Web: www.medyk.edu.pl
E-mail: m.luczak@medyk.edu.pl

WSX ENTERPRISE – United Kingdom

Contact: Julia Pearson
Address: Wates House, Wallington Hill Fareham, Hampshire, PO16 7BJ - UK
Web: <http://www.wsxenterprise.co.uk>
E-mail: connect@wsxenterprise.co.uk

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1. WHAT IS ETHOS PROJECT?

The ETHOS project is aimed to promote and improve new approaches and tools to manage and exploit – as resources for change - interpersonal, social and organizational conflicts in business environment in order to support quality and innovation in vocational education by fostering the integration of learning with working life, promoting more conducive learning environments at the workplace and work-placed training as a basis for development of vocational skills relevant to the labor market needs.

At the present moment, in fact, enterprises – and in particular SMEs - are experiencing a hard time because of the economic situation: the acquisition of skills for dealing with organizational conflicts by entrepreneurs and managers could be a means of repositioning and/or getting through the crisis for enterprises, as suggested by various European documents. For this reason, it is necessary to set up analytical and training tools, methodologies, approaches which promote and encourage the introduction of specific soft skills within corporate training plans. This will create in enterprises an environment and a climate favorable to development and innovation.

The idea of the ETHOS project was born from a LLP Grundtvig project called CONTEST - COmmunity Experiments Through the Exploitation of Social Conflicts which, involving most ETHOS partners, was aimed to promote and improve new approaches and tools to manage and exploit – as resources for change - interpersonal, social and cultural conflicts in order to enhance social cohesion in Europe and to strengthen European identity.

For the abovementioned reasons the ETHOS project intends to:

- elaborate approaches, methodologies and tools for improving in quality and innovation in vocational education;
- elaborate approaches, methodologies and tools for fostering the integration of learning with working life, promoting more learning conducive environments at the workplace, work-placed training as a basis for the development of vocational skills relevant to the labor market needs;
- develop soft skills related to conflicts exploitation among entrepreneurs and managers to improve new innovation-driven role models and management approaches;
- create within enterprises an environment and a climate which lead to social cohesion, development and innovation;
- contribute to facilitate processes of repositioning and/or overcoming the crisis for enterprises;

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- promote networking between enterprises and VET provider;
- elaborate a specific mapping system for the identification of the contextual factors which lead the conflicts in workplace, in order to provide qualitative and quantitative data for setting educational and development policies/strategies for SMEs and continuous education;
- elaborate an innovative curriculum addressed to entrepreneurs and managers and aimed at identifying, developing and enhancing workers' competences and skills for dealing with conflicts in workplace and change them in a resource for improvement and growth with reference to business environment;
- realize six experimental training courses, one for each reference country of the project, to train entrepreneurs and managers; involvement of 60 participants in all;
- realize business labs in order to let acquire workers specific competences and skills to argue well in workplace, exploiting social, cultural and organizational conflicts through the Socratic approach;
- allow the acquisition by SMEs workers of skills and competences to facilitate the expression, the management and the exploitation of conflicts in workplace, through the Socratic approach;
- set up a European network between enterprises, and between them, VET providers and organizations which work for the exploitation of conflicts, to promote and develop new approaches and tools to manage and exploit interpersonal, social and organizational conflicts in workplace;
- implement awareness raising actions to encourage the introduction of soft skills related to conflicts exploitation in corporate training plans through a process of consultation among enterprises, professional associations, policy makers, VET providers;
- disseminate the project approaches and results including the main project stakeholders aiming at making the project outcomes known all over Europe;
- exploit the project outcomes, in order to guarantee the sustainability and the transferability of the project results after the project end.
- The partnership of the project is composed of different representatives of key actors in the fields of social cohesion and vocational education: organizations which deal with vocational learning, adult learning and advisory activities for enterprises; public institutions which play an active role in the definition of policies and keeps strong relations with institutional bodies and social partner

organizations; organizations which work for the development of soft skills aimed at enhancing social cohesion.

2. WHY THIS HANDBOOK?

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This book is basically aiming at helping SME's managers (or anyone who is working there) work through conflict with colleagues, subordinates and even bosses. It's primarily aimed at those employees in organizations who find themselves dealing with difficulties without the professional conflict resolution skills and mediation experience.. With this small handbook we want to outline the kind of structures that may be in place to support you. We will also highlight the type of attitudes (e.g.: good communication, hidden issues of the conflict and taking the initiative and responsibility to find a solution) that can help everyone avoid workplace conflict, no matter what level.

Through the ETHOS project we have come up with different approaches and techniques that could help you in that matter, coping with conflicts in your company in an effective way.

We are also making some foolish assumptions in a way, when creating this book. We assume you have a job, paid or volunteer, and that you interact with other people. Also we assume that you are in charge and that you have some kind of responsibility in your SME's. We are also assuming that you are actually experiencing some trouble. You may be tired of a conflict between two of your employees, you may be quarreling with your peers, or perhaps you are encountering problems with your boss. Our final assumption is that...you want to do something about it.

Last but not least, we do hope you refer to our handbook every time you need. You don't have to read it cover to cover in order to get the insights you need to deal with conflict at work. You can flip to the chapter that best meets your needs today and come back to other parts if needed.

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3. UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

What is conflict? Conflict is something organic, kind of fluid; it means somebody is not satisfied, that a storm is brewing, and the climate is gonna change; Conflicts very often are not tangible; Conflicts can be defined as two wished in confrontation, two opposite needs that clash.

Conflict is a process; it is unacknowledged and based on interests that compete between two or more people. According to some experts like Ury, “conflicts are inevitable and they cannot be prevented nor should it be prevented”.

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Organizational conflict is defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction or disagreement with an interaction, process, product or service. Someone or somebody is not happy with other people or something like that. This dissatisfaction can result from multiple factors: different expectations, competing goals, conflicts of interests. Miscommunication or unsatisfactory interpersonal issues.

The differences in conflict between people or conflicts in an organization have different elements that distinguish one from another. The main differences are the multi-layer causal possibilities within the organization. This is not just about two parties disagreeing on an issue, perceptually or otherwise; it is more systemic than that. Organizational conflict can start to appear in many diverse forms within an organization: low moral atmosphere, breaking of relationships with stakeholders by a unhappy employee, loss of productivity, or even competition between peer employees. Conflicts that are not well managed will little by little get different shapes or forms and will start to appear through a more or less unhappy feelings, less active and competitive staff group.

The analysis of the conflict, the approach, and therefore the model to the conflict, creates the container for it. Water needs a container otherwise it simply spreads all over, wetting all in its path. The same goes for conflict. A dispute “is the product of an unsolved conflict. This way of dealing with conflicts is kind of intrusive as it appeals to facts, values and interests of the people. It digs beneath the surface where you may find potent issues related to emotions rooted in the history of the people involved. This process must be realized in a safe environment, nurtured by understanding and learning for all people involved, the resolution should be put in a new “container” that is perceived and reachable to all parties. Then conflict becomes a source for potential learning that will help parties to move forward and self develop.

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Conflict is as special and unique as the individuals and companies involved that experience it. So that the first step is always to try to break down and analyze the pieces of conflict into different containers so that you can better understand what is going on.

4. PRACTICING SELF-AWARENESS: UNDERSTANDING HOW YOU FOSTER CONFLICT

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If your group has a problem and you are wondering where to begin, one of the first places to look for change may be with you. Without that awareness you may be contributing or prolonging the conflict. In this chapter we are going to explore some of the usual pitfalls you may make in your attempts to handle problems, whether the conflict is contained between two individuals or you think that a mutiny could just happen.

- A)** Micromanagement: taking an inappropriate role in employee projects adds unnecessary friction to already tense situations. This happens basically because when an employee feels that his/her time has been wasted, he or she will blame you. Some employees may need more assistance and attention, others can probably take the lead on a project, and quickly you will know which ones can work independently and which ones will need your assistance. This way of dealing with conflicts allow you to direct your attention where it is needed most while allowing employees who need less assistance to flourish. Instead of asking questions, you can set some mutually agreed check points so that this employee can update you on his/her project. Instead of stressing about every detail, add value where your strengths shine. Instead of swooping in the last second to make some critics to some work done by your employees, set a overall vision in the start of the project and trust that your team will update you if necessary. Hovering over employees makes for an untrustworthy workplace. You take away an employee's opportunity to show that s(he is efficient when you micromanage. You will make it easier to yourself if you spend more time focusing on creating strategies, steaming out, coaching him/her for the next job and showcasing your achievements.

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B) Dividing rather than uniting: sometime you can feel like parents needing to separate kids when they fight. This approach may give you a bit of air, but it won't solve the conflict. In this case, regardless what solution you come up with, one of the parties involved in the conflict will feel that s/he is punished, and now possible you made the situation worse than before you intervened. Separating a team temporarily after a conflict between them can just give you time to think, here you are some ways you could tackle when dividing your team:

- a) Using language in a divisive way: Using language in a subtle way like “they” and “them” is a away of dividing a team. An employee is more able to feel ownership in a solution if you use words like “us” and “we” and work to unite the sides instead of playing into real separations.
- b) Keep general brainstorming meetings with your staff: in your attempt to include everyone in the decision making process, you take it a little too far and spend too long in the idea-generating phase. Then people start to take sides and the process and dynamics of the meeting change.
- c) Making agreements with/for an employee: granting one-off concessions to one employee could lead to that person being perceived as the “favorite”, other peers could ask for their own exceptions, and you, without that intention, will set a precedent that every decision to adopt is going to be up for group voting.
- d) Creating a fake perception of security: Keep up the active listening skills, but you must be sure you are not just saying every person what they want to hear. Establish specific expectations, coach employees by keeping an open attitude and be concrete about how, why and with whom you will follow up.
- e) Overreacting: The way you introduce situations to your team influence their reactions. A hyper emotional approach to obstacles and problems creates the feeling that no-one is caring for finding solutions. Try to keep a low emotional response (softy) on a daily basis, so when things go tough, your staff and colleagues will not boil over. Pray with the example, and your team is expecting you for a direction.
- f) Misunderstanding the real problems: Approaching issues of disagreements in a superficial way, or ignoring them means that you are missing a great opportunity to

find out better and more long lasting solutions to problems. It is important for you to know how to read in between the lines and capture what is most important for your employees. For sure, it will take more time and possibly a bit of researching to truly get to know the source of the problems, but it will be worth it when you are capable to help employees getting through the conflict in a positive manner. Evaluating a problem could be tricky, so keep in mind that it is important to break the conflict down, to analyze who is involved, what are the needs at play, the emotions and more important the pre-conceived expectations from the parties!

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- g) Looking the other side: It is normal sometimes to ignore a problem when you don't know what you can do to stop behaviors that adversely affect your team. Still, overlooking signs of discontent may affect and erodes your authority and reputation in the company. Watch out for the following issues: a) Bullying: it can be subtle or explicit, and you could find yourself ignoring it due to the fact that you are a bit intimidated by the "aggressor" yourself. Try to collect whatever you may need to address the situation, but handle it nonetheless. b) Power fights: these kind of "games" have no place on an effective team. If some person from your team is putting a member of your staff down, or lobbying against her peers, check out what is really happening with him/her. If it is ok for the characters and type of personalities involved, bear in mind the possibility to strengthen the weakest link rather than taking away from the strongest. Not so obvious but perhaps just as frustrating for your team is when you ignore their requests because you have no time. Sure, you are busy but try being available just via email or during ad hoc meetings could lead to strong feelings of frustration in your staff. Scheduling and keeping face-to-face time is crucial. And when you do gather with a member of your staff, move away from the computer, switch off your mobile phone, they will appreciate that focus of your attention on them.

C) How do you talk about the work with your peers or staff?

The way you discuss what you are working on, what your staff are up to and what's happening everyday it is really important to your team. If employees feel supported by you, they are more likely to watch out

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for one another and show their loyalty to you. The more informed your team is the less possibilities they will be less likely to fill in the blanks with wrong information.

D) Talking but not listening.

Who likes to listen to long boring dry sermons? You probably don't, so, why assume any of your colleagues like it. Even if you are suppose to handle conflicts as they arise, make sure you really listen to what your employees are saying before you adopt decisions that don't consider their needs. If you only focus on telling your team what you want to see rather than listening to what is happening, you will lose some basic information and opportunities to improve the general work environment. Your team is really updates with everyday work, and they know what is getting in the way of good business or causing conflicts to be recycled. If you ask questions to better understand, gives you an improved view of what is going on, so you can plan a strategy that reduces future conflict and increases productivity.

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E) Being both roles, judge and jury.

Being in those two roles inadvertently generates a dependence on you as the only decision-maker in the group. Over time, employees either resent you for not allowing them be involved in finding solutions to their own problems or getting paralysed when faced with a decision.

Work with people to come up with their own answers. People are capable of solving their own issues, and sometimes they need your assistance. Be a sounding-board by listening to your staff's concerns and then ask questions to help them bear in mind different options.

F) "Rescuing" instead of coaching.

An employee who wants and expects you to fix the situation for him/her may actually ends up resenting you. S/he may even get upset when you tell him/her that you won't do for her what she can do for him/herself. On top of it, you are at risk of being put in a bad place if things don't go ok. The person you are helping can turn on you if s/he does not get what s/he wants.

Try to coach and empower your staff to handle situations herself so that she gains the necessary abilities to manage future conflicts better, improve his/her job relationships and expand the skills that

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lead to less conflict overall. Support the person to identify the problematic areas and brainstorm different ways s/he can be more autonomous.

5. WHEN TO ADDRESS CONFLICT

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Managers usually overlook the consequences of conflict, or the cost of doing nothing about conflict, when considering the impact of disagreements. This part of the handbook will offer you some insights into whether you should enter in a conflict in your team as mediator. With this guidelines we will try to help you to monitor progress in case you opt for putting the resolution process in your employees involved.

A) Assessing the implications of the conflict: sometimes is positive to give a conflict time to work out on its own is worth it, still you won't know if you are doing the right thing until you research a bit about your strategy and if it has an impact on your teams's productivity.

The hard costs are measurable costs that can be deducted from your financial statements (eg.: lost inventory, legal prices and revenue decreases from lost sales). People often overlook them in the midst of conflict. These are some common hard costs that could be attributed to unresolved conflict:

Wasted time: People in conflict have to have an outlet for their emotions and can usually waste time by commiserating with anyone who will listen as a way to steam out what is going on. Employees start to avoid one another, taking longer breaks, coming late to work or leaving too early as a way to deal with the situation.

Absenteeism: when people don't feel good in an environment, they seek the comfort of home. If you expect people who are in conflict (or surrounded by conflict) to work without a solution, they may be getting sick days in order to avoid the situation and the stress they feel about that.

Reduced productivity: When you have to work on a project with some colleague you are not getting along with that piece of work takes longer and the final product is affected.

Quality Performance: You can probably notice a diminished quality in the work that is being delivered. Someone will have to correct mistakes that are made due to distractions, and that person may be you.

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Sabotage and theft: If your team reach a point where they sense that no-one cares about a situation, sabotage and theft is not that unusual. It can happen as simple as an employee removing or hiding inventory or equipment, or for example, taking ideas to another company where the employee will be granted and not considered as the person with the problem.

Legal costs: How far an employee is willing to take conflict to prove a point, to get you or a peer once and for all, or just to buy himself some time while he bears in mind other career options, this is often unpredictable. After a lawsuit is filed, your organization will waste money on legal fees and salaries for all the staff who are addressing the court case, not to mention that this money isn't going toward productivity or more sales.

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B) Approaching your staff and collecting information:

Knowing what you intent: will you call them in for a disciplinary action, or will you have a discussion that encourages them to be part of the solution? Try to solve the conflict at the lowest possible level. Plan a resolution strategy that uses the least amount of escalation. Start with the people involved before you bring in anyone else. Your intention should be for those involved to save face, for them to see that they can work on the conflict by their own, and for you to keep the cost and exposure of the conflict down.

Organize the players: create a list for yourself that includes those directly involved in the conflict, then add any other staff members who may be affected by the problem. When staff is in conflict, they often build armies as a means to empower their perspective. Assure to check in with secondary players to determine their level of involvement and if you consider they can help to resolve the problem. They might be satisfied just knowing that the conflict is being addresses and learning about the outcomes at a later date.

Bear in mind the place for the meeting: the place to hold the meeting says many things to other colleagues. If everyone sees one closed-door meeting after another, fear and stress can escalate. Your colleagues will be more focused on what is going on behind the door than on their own duties. The same way, publicly walking up to someone's office and initiating a discussion where other people can overhear can result in your employees to stay closed and not share much, missing then important information. Your goal should be to choose a place that is private and inconspicuous, where people can speak freely.

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Asking questions: keeping the questions open ended rather than asking some that only imply yes or no draws out more information. Open-ended inquiries allow your staff to say tell their stories while you get important details you may already know. Some possible questions to get you started:

What is going on for you in this situation?

What have you tried to do in order to come to a solution in this conflict?

In your opinion, what are the next steps to resolve this situation?

Who do you believe needs to be involved to resolve it?

How can I further support you?

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6. PLANNING ACTION TOWARDS SOLVING THE CONFLICT AND PREPARING FOR A MEETING

This part of the handbook is dedicated to all the initial work you must do to prepare your staff, colleagues or clients for a productive conflict resolution meeting. In this type of mediation, you facilitate discussion only, the responsibility for creative solutions and decisions ultimately will rely on the shoulders of the people involved in the conflict.

A) Preparing the people involved in the conflict for a conversation: if your staff have reached a point where they need some support, it's time to intervene and facilitate a mediated discussion. Here you are some guidelines about how to go about in those needed steps for coming to a solution for the conflict.

Inviting the parties involved to the meeting: start with an invitation. The goal of this invitation is to share information about the process, allow the people involved to voice any initial concerns, and last but not least, prepare them to share their views at the meeting. A written invitation has some limitations. Specifically, the employees may be concerned about, the formality of such a meeting; Who else knows about the conflict or the meetings; Whether your email or letter will be part of their permanent file; Whether their jobs are under risk.

So, try to anticipate concerns and include those items in the text of your invitation. Put their minds at ease with language that is concise and inviting.

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Explaining your role: In your communication about your meeting, discuss and clarify your dual roles in the meeting. You will need to act both as a manager and a mediator, but for very different reasons and at very different times. Instead of “the boss” you want them to see you as:

- **Facilitator:** Basically, you will be facilitating the discussion. That is to say that you won't be taking anyone's side or speaking on behalf of either party.
- **Guide:** This means that the responsibility for making all the decisions comes down to the parties involved in the conflict, not you.

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If your employees can look at you as a facilitator and a guide rather than a disciplinarian, they will be more likely to speak openly and thoughtfully, and think creatively about possible ways to solve the conflict.

Supporting the employees get into the right frame of mind: When you invite the people involved to the meeting, you can do a couple of things to prepare them and to help them create some opportunities that will make this discussion go well. Consider the following possibilities:

- Ask them to come prepared to discuss all the topics that are relevant in their conflict. Encourage them to be open and willing to talk any possible items that may come up.
- Remind them to be aware of their language, including tone of their voices and body postures and gestures.

Guarantee confidentiality: Start by addressing the extent to which you will be acting in a confidential manner. Specifically, clarify with the parties involved in the conflict what you will and won't share with others. If you have to report to your superior manager the results of the discussion, be clear and upfront about it. Moreover, you must address the confidentiality expectations you have of the employees. Others may be interested in that discussion, you have to tell the people involved how they should speak about the upcoming meeting with the rest of the staff.

Setting up the meeting: here comes some guidelines in order to prepare your employees to sit down and the get the discussion started.

- Choosing a neutral location: you may think that your office is the perfect place but, the truth is, your office only empowers the idea that this meeting is a disciplinary action, and you may want to avoid this message. Instead, choose a meeting room that is as private as possible. Try to avoid rooms in a high-traffic area and/or with lots of windows, instead of that, look for a spot

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where other people won't influence your conversation. Private means also minimal distractions. Avoid telephones ringing, computer beeps, people passing by, etc. Listening efficiently is hard when you have distractions competing for your attention.

- Allow enough time: successful mediated discussions take some time. If you follow all the guidelines mentioned in this handbook a meeting may take between 3 to 4 hours. Be sure you plan it with enough time.
- Facilitating a comfortable environment: These type of conversations can be difficult and uncomfortable for employees. You can help create a more positive response to the conversation, however, by improving the comfort of the space around. Both parties involved should have equal access to all the amenities that you provide.

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Preparing yourself: with all the work you have done to prepare everything, you need to take some time to focus on your self. Remember this is your staff's conflict. They own the problems, so they also own the possible solutions! If you allow yourself to become attached to the conflict and you become invested enough to make suggestions or give solutions, you will be responsible for those outcomes, independently they succeed or fail.

Before your meeting begins, take about 30 minutes to prepare yourself for what has to come. There may be strong emotions coming, not only for the parties involved in the conflict but also for the observer. Expect to hear language that is printed with emotions, and stay tuned accordingly. Prepare yourself before the meeting begins:

- **Mentally**: Be prepared to listen for facts, figures, timis so you can track it all straight in your own mind.
- **Emotionally**: This is the self preparation that comes with expecting to hear difficult language and raised voices. Remember that the conflict does not belong to you but to your staff or colleagues and they are responsible for them.
- **Personally**: Whatever supports you cleaning your mind and stay focus on the here and now will help you make the most of your time in the coming meeting. Some mediators practice meditation before the meeting due to its powerful effects in your concentration and self-control of your emotions. Some people prefer complete silence before the parties come in.

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7. HANDLING POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE CONFLICT

In this part of the handbook we will give you some information you need to move your staff beyond a list of discussion topics onto collaboratively addressing the conflict and brainstorming potential ways to deal with it. You will find some tools to work towards resistance so you can conduct your staff from a state of blaming one another to a problem-solving mindset, creatively enabling them to tackle potential issues, through a new skill set.

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- A) Empowering communication:** Here you will find some guidelines to focus and organize the discussion. Keep the parties talking, but guide them to keep positive, be creative and go further their immediate problems.
- **Transition from past to future:** Make a statement about moving out of the past and into the present so you can set the stage for dialogue about solutions rather than problems. To manage your staff to talk about the future, use the agenda they did as a visual tool by standing next to it or pointing to it.
 - **Motivating your staff:** Try to validate your employees or colleagues for their efforts and look for ways to acknowledge the good job they achieved so far. Look for areas of common ground between the parties in conflict, and anytime you detect values they have in common, like respect or autonomy, point them out. Foster the idea that that discussion is in fact an opportunity to create what they want ongoing relationship to look like.
 - **Listening and interjecting:** The negotiation process is about your staff or colleagues working together to create their own response to the conflict. Do more listening than speaking and, when you do interject, use the following strategies: Ask questions, as the majority of the speaking you do should come in this way. Focus on encouraging the parties; Clarify and summarize, and listen for any language that threatens to derail the process, such as blaming, antagonizing, or name-calling. Also consider that due to the emotional state of the parties there is more room for misunderstandings or misinterpretations. If the language that parties use is downright hostile, you can intervene by reflecting their emotions, reframing their language to focus in their interests, and erasing any provocative words you hear. Remind the speaker that he made a commitment to obey the agreed rules for this meeting, and warn him that he needs to manage

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the way he speaks about his/her emotions; Capture proposals: when you hear proposed solutions from either party, brief the important points and put them in language that's comfortable for the other party to go through. Ask the other party what she likes or doesn't like about the proposal, whether s/he accepts it as is, or if s/he'd like to make a counter proposal.

- B) Discovering what is really relevant**: people in conflict use to come to the meeting with a special approach in mind, the win-lose approach, discussing about the merits of each other's perspective. By focusing the conversation on values, you can support them to find similar interests and further develop a collaborative approach to negotiating. Thanks to this, the parties can move away from what they DON'T LIKE and nudges them toward what they would like.
- C) Reading in between lines to discover values**: Responding to a person about what s/he values rather than adding to the criticism of what the other has done wrong makes the second party to brief her view of the situation without becoming defensive. When you reflect a person's statement, you also shape good communication for both of them.
- D) Fostering brainstorming**: Encourage the parties to view this technique as an opportunity to create any kind of solutions they can imagine. Give them the freedom to suggest anything and you will find that their proposals and thoughts are as creative as they are efficient. Best brainstorming takes place without limits to creativity but focuses on one area at a time. In this sense this guidelines may help you: Remember that any idea is a good idea, because brainstorming is about articulating any and all possibilities before deciding on anything; Follow time limits, some of the ideas come when people are pressed for time; And last but not least, generate as many ideas as you can before going to assess them.
- E) Narrowing the possible solutions**: After the parties in conflict generate a number of ideas, begin to make some decisions. Support them establish some kind of evaluation criteria for their proposals and decide how best to choose agreements that meet both of their needs.

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8. CHECKING HOW YOUR SME CAN HELP

Companies that acknowledge the consequences and costs of unresolved conflicts give resources to help employees solving problems as early as possible. And those enterprises that haven't invested in large-scale conflict resolution strategies usually offer at least a few basic measures.

In this part of the handbook we will look at the most usual conflict resolution resources to help you determine which option can best meet the needs of your circumstances. It also show you how you can design a conflict resolution system for your organization, one that deals with present and future conflicts.

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A) Working with Human Resources:

Human resources experts work hard at equilibrating efforts between the staff, the enterprise and the law. Try to benefit from their objective viewpoint when you need some more information or want coaching on how to handle a problem. HR department as a partner can help you create an action plan. HR staff know what conflicts can cost a company. HR can sometimes do the following operations:

- Provide an employee the chance to save face and build confidence.
- Provide insights into your management style. In this sense HR can help you to identify your strengths and weaknesses, what does work and what doesn't.
- Support you in managing your staff on an individual level.

B) Researching mediation programs:

There are no general or standard recipes for workplace dispute resolution options, so do a little investigating to see what is offered in your workplace. Sometimes you may find the possibility to meet with a mediator or councilor. Try to get familiar with what conflict resolution measures your company can provide, and how people can get to them, so you can use the resources and encourage staff to access those options on their own. Introduce them to your team as valuable tools that you support.

The process of mediation use to be very confidential, and allows employees the opportunity to come back with an agreement they can share or keep to themselves.

C) Take the initiative to design a conflict resolution plan:

This means giving several members of the organization the abilities they need to solve conflicts early, as well as giving them a variety of avenues for them to seek support in resolving conflicts. Having a

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wide range of possibilities at your disposal allows people to choose a resource they're most comfortable with and will be able to resolve conflicts before they escalate.

You may not be in a position to change the overall culture of your SME, but you can change the culture of those who work for/with you and share your successes with those in the higher managerial positions.

Here come some suggestions about different things you could do:

Provide training: In conflict resolution, it helps the staff become aware of the behaviors that influence others. It also enables them with the abilities to cope with those behaviors by themselves. That training could start with basics in communication, active listening skills, identification of conflict styles for each individual, showing how to approach conflict when it arises, emotions involved in such process and tips how to go about them, relaxation techniques, etc.

Providing outside mediators & facilitators: you can identify resources and opportunities outside the enterprise that can provide conflict resolution opportunities. It is very interesting to know where you can turn if a conflict escalates beyond your abilities set, proactive move that keeps you from having to scramble in the heat of the moment.

Giving the staff multiple ways to access resources: Make sure your employees know everything that's available to them (trained mediators, councilors, HR, and so on) so they can decide what is the most comfortable. If they are limited to contact only one person for support, they might be less apt to approach conflict from a solutions-oriented view.

Leave the door always open: It does not matter how far a conflict escalates, always create an opportunity for parties to come back to the table to solve it. Be open to any requests to settle while you still have some control over the outcome.

D) What your company can do: Having the support from all the company is absolutely necessary for a successful conflict resolution plan to work, so consider who else in the organisation could be willing in adding to and improving your already existing resources. Possible measures that a SME could undertake are:

- * Determine what conflict is costing the company.
- * Evaluate what are you doing good and where to improve.
- * Identify key actors in your organization. (keep sharing resources and include as many staff as you are able to from different fields to build on what already exists).

* Research what resources are at your disposal in your local community (most organizations are non-profit and use skillful mediators to solve a big variety of problems, and it includes workplace conflicts, at a relatively cheap price).

* Begin humble and track your achievements. However you start, check any visible changes as a manner to show solid results, like for example if employees are having fewer conflicts and managers are dealing with complaints better or check the employees turnover, use of sick leave and punctuality issues are lowering.

* Foresee and allocate enough money to support your plan for conflict resolution.

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9. TEN DIAMONDS FROM THE BEST MEDIATORS IN SME'S

Watching conflict through to a positive resolution can be life-changing. Supporting others, and yourself, through a difficult time is quite rewarding.

Our goal with this last chapter is to share our insights in this project about mediation and conflict and to benefit from it as much as you can. Hopefully some of this expertise will guide you in turning problems around in your daily work life without having to be an expert in conflict resolution.

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- A) Value the process as much as the goal:** Achieving a solution may be a clear sign that a dispute had gone well. A mediation process that allows the parties to come away with an understanding of the real problems can also deliver broader benefits, such as more collaboration between the two parties, and it also can contribute to improve their creativity and foster their productivity.
- B) Accept that the other person's truth is his/her reality:** The point of mediating in conflicts is not to act as a judge. The goal of the conversations is not for you to find out who is telling the truth and who is not, cause for the parties involved, both are absolutely true. Try to work within a person's point of view to support him/her in finding a solution to the conflict.
- C) Empathy matters:** Introducing yourself professionally and being open to input from all sides generates a comfy environment for both parties to be honest with you about what is happening and what they are determined to do in order to solve the problem. Try to get off to a good start by being authentically interested in the perspectives of all the people involved in the conflict.
- D) Be present and available:** Keep your full attention to the parties you have in front of you during a conversation about conflict, not to the phone or computer, or other distractions. Give them the same care that you would like for yourself.
- E) Find common ground for a more successful meeting:** People involved in conflict tend to focus only on differences and these ones are what keep them fighting. Instead of focus on what is dividing the, find the things that they have in common. Mediators who manage to keep their users focused on common interests have successful outcomes more times that not, and you also can.
- F) Be aware that this is not probably the parties' best moment:** The people in conflict are not at their best, feelings like fear, sadness, anger, revenge can lead a person to a difficult behavior

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sometimes. Of course, it does not mean that behind those emotions the person is not a decent one just doing his/her best. Remember that we always do the best we are able to in every moment of our lives, this belief is coming from Buddhist philosophy and somehow it is interesting to consider it in difficult moments as it can provide us with some empathy to ourselves and the other person in the conflict.

- G) Silence is gold:** Silence helps! Don't rescue your staff or colleagues when they sit in stony silence. The more uncomfortable they get, the more obvious you demonstrate to them that this is their conflict. If you talk to cut the silence, you may take away the chance for the parties to share something important.
- H) Be curious:** This is one the mediator's most effective tools. A good way to start with the conversation could be. "help me understand..." and "I am sorry, I'm quite confident what you meant when you told..." this helps a lot the person who is talking to you.
- I) Fear, be careful about it!:** Big egos, tough behavior and bully strategies all come down to the fear of losing something. The bigger the action, the bigger the fear. Work to unveil what a colleague or a co-worker may be afraid of from the conflict and help him/her realize what is indeed real in such fear. Also try to explore what are the real needs at stake in both parties, help them to show them and to communicate each other from there. It is very important that they can listen to the other person needs. Very often, people in a conflict talks and communicated with all their body from an demanding attitude, fusing their scary pointing finger, but it is important to support them in another type of communication. Empathic communication can help so much in the parties to realize what are the other's needs without demanding for a solution, just listening to their sadness or frustration can help to deflate the conflict balloon!
- J) Look to the future:** Staying in the past is much like circling the drain; around and around we go. Asking parties to share their views, is a good way to start a mediated discussion. All of them have the right to tell her side of the story, but keeping saying the same thing that they said in the past will not solve anything, but the opposite. When you have the feeling the perspective has been heard, move to deal with it adequately by focusing the discussion on what the parties would like to see next and how they could make that happen.

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