dealing
with high conflict
behaviours

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The Victorian Government has vested the State Services Authority with functions designed to foster the development of an efficient, integrated and responsive public sector which is highly ethical, accountable and professional in the ways it delivers services to the Victorian community.

The key functions of the Authority are to:

- identify opportunities to improve the delivery and integration of government services and report on service delivery outcomes and standards;
- promote high standards of integrity and conduct in the public sector;
- strengthen the professionalism and adaptability of the public sector; and
- promote high standards of governance, accountability and performance for public entities.

The Authority seeks to achieve its charter by working closely and collaboratively with public sector departments and agencies.

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introduction

the costs of high conflict behaviour

In research conducted for the State Services Authority in 2010, Victorian public sector managers and HR practitioners could readily identify instances of high conflict at work. The individuals engaging in the high conflict took up an inordinate amount of management time. Their adversarial, self-absorbed and defensive behaviours disrupted the workplace, often leading to increased staff absences, stress claims and lost productivity[1].

The Victorian experience is echoed in other settings. A global study of workplace conflict conducted in 2008[2], found that an overwhelming majority (85%) of employees at all levels experience conflict to some degree and 29% do so frequently or always. Some of the negative outcomes seen from poorly managed conflict were staff absences (25%), turnover (18%) and failed projects (9%). For this reason many (70%) saw managing conflict as a critical leadership skill. In the US, employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict. This equates to approximately $359 billion each year.

Closer to home, Australian Ombudsmen found the national average for cases involving unreasonable complainant conduct (high conflict) is 5%. Even though the percentage of cases is quite small, the complainants demand a disproportionate amount of the Ombudsman's time and resources, and cause serious stress both to themselves and their case officers[3].

a practical guide

This guide looks at high conflict behaviour and its disruptive effect on the workplace and our ability to do our job. Negative relationships have a negative impact on job satisfaction and organisational commitment. It is therefore important to address. No single person can do this alone. They need the support of their organisation and the authority to act[4].

We each have a duty of care to provide a safe working environment, especially if we are managers or leaders. High conflict behaviours are damaging to team cohesiveness but many of us may be uncertain of what to do to prevent its occurrence and the most successful strategies may seem counter intuitive to us.

The guide is intended for anyone who is managing or working with someone who engages in high conflict. It will also be of interest to HR advisers and employee assistance providers who often assist managers to develop and sustain a productive and positive work environment. Part of their role will be to counsel on tailored strategies to respond to and mitigate high conflict behaviour. Finally, the guide will be of interest to employees who have a predisposition to high conflict behaviour themselves.

The guide describes common situations at work and offers strategies for improving the quality of staff interactions, managing performance, recruiting staff, and understanding and being comfortable with conflict. The strategies can be adapted to different workplaces and applied to different situations and relationships.

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1   State Services Authority 2010, *Best Practice Support for Managing Difficult Behaviours*

2   CPP 2008, *Global Human Capital Report: Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness it to Thrive*

3   NSW Ombudsman 2009, *Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Project Report*

4   M Kusy & E Holloway 2009, *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and their Systems of Power*

defining high conflict behaviour

Anyone is capable of high conflict behaviour at some time. For most of us this will be because we don't feel in control of events, we have suffered a disappointment or we are unwell. But these occurrences will be very uncommon and afterwards we may regret our response or apologise.

Some people have a greater predisposition to high conflict behaviour[5]. This often leads others to see them as 'difficult'; hard to deal with and hard to get on with. This is a strategy they may have learnt growing up to get their own way or it may be caused by an underlying mental illness. In either case they are unlikely to be high conflict all the time. It would be too exhausting to be continually in a state of high conflict.

While most people can learn to adapt their behaviour to suit changed circumstances, those with a mental illness may be less able to do so. Their best choice may be to seek treatment from a medical practitioner. This guide is not intended to address mental illness.

Contact

If you sense something is not quite right with a colleague call the SANE Helpline on 1800 18 7263 for information and advice any weekday between 9am and 5pm. SANE Australia is a national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness through campaigns, education and research. Included on their website is a checklist: <http://www.sane.org/information/factsheets-podcasts/198-something-is-not-quite-right>.

People with high conflict behaviours can be characterised by:

- Rigid and uncompromising thinking and actions
- An inability to accept or heal from loss
- Negative emotions that dominate their thinking
- An inability to reflect on their own behaviour
- Difficulty empathising with others
- Preoccupation with blaming others[6].

Difficult people have generally not learnt how to resolve relationship problems and do not understand how their own behaviour contributes to the problem. Early identification of high conflict behaviours will limit their impact on the team and organisation.

High conflict is not the only challenging behaviour that people may have to deal with at work. While people who engage in high conflict may be dramatic, emotional or erratic, those who are passive aggressive[7] are pessimistic about the future and passively resist requests made by those in authority. At times sullen or irritable, they may feel cheated and misunderstood, and envious of their peer's success. They may intentionally forget to complete assigned work.

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5 People with a predisposition to high conflict behaviour may have a Cluster B personality disorder (dramatic, emotional or erratic behaviour) as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual Fourth Edition Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR). The WHO *World Mental Health Survey* estimates that 1.5% of the world population has a Cluster B personality disorder. In Victoria this would represent more than 83,000 people. Almost half of the respondents (45%) to the ABS *National Survey of Health and Wellbeing* reported having a mental disorder at some time in their life.

6 B Eddy (unpublished), *The Workplace Workbook: Dealing with High Conflict People as Customers, Employees and Bosses*

7 *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual Fourth Edition Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR).

Check for high conflict thinking

We can all be guilty of high conflict thinking at some stage of our working life. Here are a few questions to ask yourself to keep any high conflict thinking in check.

Do I see things in absolute terms?

While you may think there is only one explanation or one solution to your problem, there may be others. Think further about the problem and see what other ideas occur to you. The truth might lie in these other ideas.

Do I jump to conclusions?

If you have very little information, it's unwise to assume the worst about the future or a person's intentions towards you. It's better to gather all the facts before deciding what to do. The situation might be quite different from what you initially think.

Do I take things personally?

Sometimes people imagine that a series of unrelated events was meant to cause them harm when this is untrue. For example, if your manager decides to advertise a job while you are on leave the explanation is more likely to be that he needs an additional resource than that he didn't want you to apply.

Do I assume facts from feelings?

Feeling that you are in danger is not the same as being in danger. Feeling upset around someone is not the same as them doing something to upset you. Get in touch with your feelings. How realistic are they? Do they recall your reaction to a past event rather than to your current reality?

Do I know with certainty what the other person is thinking?

Mind reading is impossible. While you might believe you know what someone is thinking, you might be completely mistaken. It's better to have a discussion about the situation and find out what the person is actually thinking.

Would life be better if the other person was gone?

It's unlikely that there is someone in your working life who is the cause of all your problems. Taking ownership of your working life, the decisions you make and the actions you take are more likely to lead to a happy work life than blaming someone else for all your problems.

Am I preoccupied with a single issue?

If you are preoccupied with a single issue, you may be missing more important issues. For example, you may feel disappointed that you weren't selected to a project team but your manager may need a team that has a particular set of skills and experiences to complete the work.

Are my fears exaggerated?

Situations that are safe or manageable may seem extremely dangerous for no objective reason. For example, a new staff member joins the team. She seems to get on well with your manager and you start to believe that you will be retrenched.

Do I project my feelings and behaviours onto others?

Projection happens when you mistakenly see your feelings or behaviour in the other person. For example, instead of acknowledging your own anger or mistrust you see the other person as angry and distrustful. This is a faulty basis to a relationship.

Do I see some people as all good or all bad?

When we're angry we tend to say things we don't mean. We might say: 'you never contribute to the team' when of course this is very unlikely to be true. No one is either all good or all bad.

Tips

- Everyone is capable of high conflict thinking at some stage of their working lives.
- Listen for high conflict thinking in your colleagues.
- Check for high conflict thinking in yourself.

the strategies at a glance

The strategies included in this guide fall into three main categories:

A. responding to high conflict behaviours day to day

B. identifying and avoiding potential risks

C. understanding and changing patterns of behaviour

Read through this overview to give you a better understanding of the issues and how to respond to them. Then turn to the section most relevant to your needs for more detail.

A: responding to high conflict behaviours day to day

A.1: working with a difficult person

Difficult people can be highly emotional and argumentative. Being in their presence can be difficult. But there are a few tips that can help you cope with their behaviour and perhaps lead to a better relationship with them. Firstly, it is important to remain calm and logical and to use a friendly tone of voice. This is likely to have a calming effect on the difficult person and will make them feel respected. Avoid criticising the difficult person, giving them advice or apologising to them. All these actions are likely to trigger their defensiveness. Your aim should be to move them from criticising the past to solving their concerns in the future.

When the difficult person is in high conflict mode, keep your encounter with them brief. Listen attentively to their concerns, respond with objective information and close the conversation politely but firmly.

When you are away from the difficult person and can think calmly, consider your realistic options for improving the situation. Set limits on their behaviour using any authority available to you including your organisation's policies and practices. Respond quickly to any misinformation about you that the difficult person shares with your colleagues. Your silence could be mistaken for agreement.

A.2: managing high conflict behaviours

If you manage a difficult person, you have additional authority to manage their behaviour through your organisation's performance management system. When giving them feedback, start with the positive before moving onto areas for improvement. Avoid drawing inferences, being sarcastic, making absolute statements or using judgemental language. All these actions are likely to trigger the difficult person's defensiveness.

Listen attentively to their viewpoint, draw on other reports and your own observations to help them see the need to change their behaviour, and together set some SMART goals. These are specific, measurable, achievable, results oriented and time specific.

Set consequences within your authority for not changing their behaviour and be prepared to follow through on these if there is no change. The consequences could include formal warning, disciplinary action or in extreme circumstances termination of employment. It's very important that you follow your organisation's policies closely and document each stage of the process thoroughly.

Know when to seek help. Find out what assistance your employer can provide you. This may include a professional coach, mentor, peer support or HR advice. Managing a difficult person can be exhausting and this may be the first time you have experienced a difficult person in your team.

If the difficult person leaves your organisation, work with your team to repair team culture. They may have learnt adaptive behaviours to cope with the difficult person and may also have unresolved feelings of anger and frustration. Help them to identify one or two core actions to improve team culture and offer them professional counselling through your organisation's employee assistance program.

B: identifying and avoiding potential risks

B.1: identifying high conflict applicants

Managers are often called upon to participate on interview panels. They will be seeking to appoint someone to their team who is not only competent but also open, able to build trust and make connections[8]. A workplace without high conflict is more productive.

At interview ask behavioural questions that test for high conflict behaviours[9]. Look to recruit applicants who adapt their leadership style to different people, accept responsibility for errors, know when to seek assistance and are willing to collaborate. Test out any concerns you have about the applicant with their referees.

Some jobs may warrant the cost of using psychometric tests. Look for tests that measure emotional stability, agreeableness and conscientiousness[10]. These attributes predict team performance better than cognitive ability. However, be aware that some applicants may be able to predict the socially desirable answer to multiple choice questions and therefore invalidate the results.

B.2: are you protecting a difficult person?

Difficult people are often adept at attracting protectors. This may be because they have a special relationship with their protector or their skills seem to warrant special attention. Guard against becoming the protector of a difficult person by listening to both sides of the story before making a decision, continuing to think logically rather than react emotionally to their story and taking any complaints seriously even if the difficult person doesn't seem difficult to you. You may be exempt from their difficult behaviour. They may reserve their high conflict behaviour for other people. Listen to your colleagues. They may tell a different story about what is happening in your team.

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8   M Kusy & E Holloway 2009, *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and their Systems of Power*

9   State Services Authority 2011, *Mastering the Art of Interviewing and Selection*

10 The *HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised* assesses six dimensions of personality including emotionality, agreeableness and conscientiousness. It scores those who forgive the wrongs they have suffered, are lenient in judging others, are willing to compromise and cooperate with others, and can easily control their temper as highly agreeable.

C: understanding and changing patterns of behaviour

C.1: transforming conflict

Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. It can help us consider all relevant viewpoints to reach better decisions. However conflict that is personalised can be very damaging. Organisations may have a variety of ways of dealing with conflict ranging from coaching, mediation and facilitation to formal complaints[11]. Some of these will be more effective for handling disputes with a difficult person than others. Remember that difficult people are used to being in high conflict situations. They lack empathy and have difficulty healing from loss. Any technique that gives the difficult person a chance to be in high conflict mode, to concentrate on the past and blame others for their problems is going to be less effective.

One technique worth considering is transformative mediation. Here the emphasis is on transforming the interaction between the parties, rather than just on settling a particular dispute, although disputes are often settled. Difficult people are often in conflict because they are unable to understand how their behaviour affects others. So solving the particular dispute may not be as important as helping the person manage their relationships better.

Even if you decide not to engage a transformative mediator, you can still apply the principles of transformative mediation. These include active listening, reflecting back what has been said, summarising the discussion and clarifying points.

C.2: how best to respond to conflict

We show respect by being genuine, listening attentively and supporting colleagues. Part of respecting others is recognising our inherent differences. One of those differences is our response to conflict. While some people are competitive and enjoy the cut and thrust of debate, others may be accommodating and agree to things they don't really support just to keep the peace. There is sure to be misunderstandings and hurt feelings if people don't understand and appreciate these differences. A useful tool is the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* or TKI[12]. It helps people understand how we have a preferred style of responding to conflict but can draw upon other styles when our preferred style would be less effective. It also explains that every style has benefits and drawbacks depending on the situation.

Tips

- Remember you have a duty of care to all members of your team, not just the difficult person.
- Model the behaviours you expect of colleagues and reinforce the values in daily work.
- Pay attention to your gut feelings. If an otherwise good applicant doesn't seem right for your team, ask them probing questions, invite them to a second interview or test your concerns with their referee.
- Avoid triggering a difficult person's defensiveness by remaining calm and friendly and not criticising the past. Be clear about the future.
- Keep encounters with a difficult person brief when they are in high conflict mode. Be friendly, informative and firm.

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11 State Services Authority 2010, *Developing Conflict Resilient Workplaces*
12 https://www.cpp.com/products/tki/index.aspx

- Set limits on the difficult person's behaviour using your personal authority and organisational rules.

- Become comfortable with conflict at work but always discourage personality driven conflict.

- Think logically rather than react emotionally to the difficult person's account of the situation.

- Recognise when you can resolve a dispute with someone and when you need help from your manager, a trusted friend, HR or an independent third party.

- Follow your organisation's policies and procedures and document thoroughly.

A.1 working with a difficult person

You may be working with a difficult person who is your manager, peer, staff member or stakeholder. Regardless of their relationship to you, here are some tips to avoid triggering their high conflict behaviours, helping them develop a positive mindset, and perhaps establishing a more productive relationship with them.

why is it hard to work with a difficult person?

Difficult people can have unrealistic expectations of their colleagues and lack personal insight. When relationships sour, they don't know how to solve the problem and their high conflict behaviours have often caused or worsened the situation. Their traits include:

- Rigid and uncompromising thinking and actions
- An inability to accept or heal from loss
- Emotionally negative thinking
- An inability to reflect on their own behaviour
- A difficulty empathising with others
- A tendency to blame others.

You may first become aware that you are working with a difficult person when they angrily confront you with a lot of accusations about how you have made their life difficult. You may be tempted to respond in kind or to answer each of their claims, but don't. Reacting angrily to a difficult person is likely to trigger even more high conflict behaviour from them as they become increasingly defensive. Remember they are unlikely to be self-aware and cannot see the situation from your perspective.

Home alone

Sarah takes a call from her son's school. Sean is ill and will need to be picked up. He is only seven so he can't be left at home alone. Sarah will need to take at least the rest of the afternoon off to care for Sean. She tells her manager and starts to pack up her things before leaving. Her colleague Rachel sees what is happening and suddenly blasts Sarah: 'How dare you just leave me in the lurch like that. You're always doing that. Getting out of jobs you don't actually want to do. How very convenient that you can just go home and leave me to complete the work alone. Don't think I'll let you get away with it.' Rachel doesn't cope well with change and her outbursts are becoming more frequent. They have begun to trouble Sarah.

Sarah bites her lip. She feels guilty that she has to leave work but it is an emergency. Rachel doesn't have young children at home and doesn't seem to appreciate that their care and safety must come first. Sarah feels like saying that she is doing the greater share of the work and that if Rachel had done her part, the work would have already been completed. But she decides to say something different.

avoid triggering defensiveness

Sarah was right not to respond angrily to Rachel's accusations. This would have just made the situation worse. It's difficult to work productively with someone when there is a lot of tension between you.

The key ways to avoid triggering defensiveness in a difficult person are:

- **Remaining calm and logical**: This is a skill you will need to practise. It will not come naturally at first. It is more usual to respond to an angry person with anger or fear. But if you can remain calm, this will have a calming influence on the difficult person. It will also allow you to think logically rather than emotionally, and not say things you later regret.

- **Using a friendly tone of voice**: Model the style of communication you would prefer to have with the difficult person. A friendly tone of voice lets the difficult person know that you respect them and have an interest in resolving your differences.

- **Avoiding criticism**: Difficult people focus on the past. By emphasising future behaviour rather than criticising the past, you will help the difficult person become less agitated and focus on a solution to their problem.

- **Avoiding advice**: Difficult people are rigid and uncompromising in their thinking. Giving them unsolicited advice is unlikely to be appreciated.

- **Avoiding apologies**: Difficult people blame you for their situation and cannot see how their behaviour may have contributed to the way they feel. If you apologise, they will feel vindicated. It really was 'all your fault'.

keep encounters with a difficult person brief

You may feel like avoiding a difficult person altogether but this is not always possible, particularly if you work in the same team or on the same project. When you do meet them, and if they are in high conflict mode, keep the encounter brief and follow these tips:

- **Listen to their concerns attentively**: Everyone wants to feel that they have been heard, not least the difficult person. Show them empathy by trying to see the situation from their point of view, and listening for things you can agree with and are willing to acknowledge.

- **Respond with objective information**: Put your side of the case objectively. Refer to any organisational policies or agreed work priorities that give authority for what you are doing. Ignore any accusations that are plainly untrue or that you have discussed on previous occasions.

- **Close the conversation**: State what you intend to do to solve the situation. Be firm but respectful. You want to close the conversation and remove yourself from their presence.

Forced choice

Sarah stopped packing and listened attentively to what Rachel had to say. She ignored most of the accusations Rachel made about her avoiding work and taking time off. She knew if she were to answer all of these complaints, Rachel would just continue to focus on the past and the dispute would continue. This is what she said instead: 'Rachel, I know it's really important to you that we meet our deadlines. It's important to me too. The work is due next Monday and most of it has already been done. Our flexible leave policy allows me to take time off when Sean is ill. The school has rung and I can't leave him at home alone. Let me know what else I need to do when I'm back at work.' With that she continued packing and left the office.

responding to misinformation

Rachel has threatened that Sarah 'will not get away' with her actions. This may mean that she will complain to their manager or spread rumours about her in the office. Sarah will need to decide the likelihood of this happening and what if anything she needs to do in response. Difficult people are good at casting themselves in the role of victim and getting others to argue in their defence.

Here are some points that you might want to keep in mind if you find yourself in a situation similar to Sarah's:

- **Ignore the difficult person's misinformation when it doesn't involve anyone else**: The difficult person may have an opinion about you that is wrong and unlikely to change even after you have talked it over with them. Ignore their opinions.

- **Respond quickly to misinformation that is shared in your workplace**: The difficult person may copy other people into the accusatory email they send to you. They may post you a letter with cc to others or they may disparage you in meetings with your manager. In these situations you must respond quickly to the misinformation. Silence can be mistaken for agreement. Respond in the same media as the original communication; for example, an email in response to an email. Be friendly, brief, informative and firm. For example, had Rachel complained to their manager, Sarah could put her side of the case factually just as she has done with Rachel. She could say that her absence from work was unavoidable; she had completed her part of the project and intended to touch base with Rachel on her return to work.

analyse your realistic options

Sarah has had an unpleasant encounter with Rachel. She will need to analyse her realistic options before deciding what to do in the future.

It is easier to think about options calmly and logically when you are not in the heat of the moment. There may be a number of possible solutions to your problem but some will be more realistic than others. Write down three to ten options that occur to you and then analyse each one in turn. Decide on the one or two options that have the greatest potential to solve your problem. Talk it over with friends, mentor or other people you trust before taking action.

Your options will depend on where you sit in the organisation and your formal relationship with the difficult person. Options must be realistic and capable of being implemented.

The turning point

Sarah writes down a number of options before considering each one in turn. Some are unrealistic and she rejects them. Others have possibility:

- Resign from work – can't afford it.
- Leave Sean home alone – impossible morally and legally.
- Engage a nanny - too expensive.
- Ask for a transfer - a long-term possibility.
- Take leave - a short-term possibility.

- Draw up a work plan with their manager outlining what is to be done by whom and by when - feasible.
- Find out from Rachel the work she prefers to do - feasible.

Sarah suspects that Rachel is not confident about the work she is currently doing. Ideally their manager could assign Rachel different work or arrange training to develop her skills. Rachel could also work with Sarah and their manager to more clearly outline responsibilities so disputes between the two women would be less likely to happen in the future. Rachel would also be unable to accuse Sarah of not pulling her weight.

set limits

Sarah will want to influence Rachel's future behaviour towards her. She must find a way to work with her productively. There are a number of strategies Sarah could try, perhaps after testing them out with a mentor or trusted colleague:

- **Being assertive**: Speaking to the difficult person in a confident, self-assured and positive way will set the right tone for your interactions with them. Set limits firmly and establish the rules of the relationship and consequences for breaking them. The consequences must be within your power to follow through on.

- **Using power**: Everyone has power. Some have power because of the authority their role gives them. Others can refer to the authority that their organisation's policies give to their actions. It's important not to give people more power than they deserve. You can set limits on a difficult person's behaviour by limiting your contact with them or limiting what you will discuss with them. For example, you might only meet with the difficult person when others are present such as in a team meeting, or you might keep your meetings with them brief and business like. You can encourage them to stop doing something by saying: 'if you don't do this, then I will do that' or encourage them to do something by saying: 'if you do this, then I will do that'. For example, Sarah might say: 'Let's sit down and discuss which tasks we each prefer to do, then we can decide how to divide up the work'. Sarah is effectively saying: 'If you stop complaining about work, then I will consider doing some of the tasks you don't like doing'. Or Sarah might say: 'If you continue working on the project in my absence, then I will take on the remaining tasks when I return'. She is effectively saying: 'If you are more flexible, then I will also be flexible'.

- **Challenging the behaviour**: Acknowledge that you have been unfairly attacked by the difficult person, even if it is only to yourself. If you feel confident to do so, challenge their behaviour towards you. Pick the time and place carefully. Describe the specific behaviour you object to and how you would like to be treated instead.

- **Focusing on solving the problem**: Keep the difficult person in the right frame of mind by getting them to think about how their problem could be solved in the future rather than criticising the past.

decide what you want from the relationship

Ultimately Sarah will need to decide on the type of relationship she wants to have with Rachel and whether the relationship is worth her effort. Her employer may have a similar decision to make about Rachel but has additional powers including the power to discipline, reassign staff to other work and terminate their employment.

You have three options when working with a difficult person. You can manage your relationship with them, reduce your relationship or phase it out altogether:

- **Manage the relationship**: By practising the tips in this guide you will develop the skills and confidence to manage your relationship with the difficult person. Ignore the emotional hooks, don't criticise the past, keep focussed on the future. Refer to policies that validate your actions and focus on logical reasoning.

- **Reduce the relationship**: If the difficult person has skills that you admire or are important to the organisation and your work, then you might want to limit your contact with them to times when you can work together productively.

- **Phase the relationship out**: A difficult person is likely to feel rejected if you try to avoid opportunities to work or converse with them. They may try to talk you out of your decision or punish you for it. Give them the time they need to process and accept change. In time they will be reconciled to your decision.

Tips

- Avoid triggering a difficult person's defensiveness by remaining calm and friendly and not criticising the past.

- Keep encounters with a difficult person brief. Be friendly, informative and firm.

- Respond quickly to misinformation the difficult person shares with your manager or colleagues. Silence can be mistaken for agreement.

- Brainstorm three to ten options and consider how realistic each one is in turn before deciding what to do next.

- Set limits on the difficult person's behaviour using your personal authority and organisational rules.

- Decide whether the relationship with the difficult person is worth the effort and then manage, reduce or phase the relationship out.

Management is a skill to be practised. Good managers apply different management styles to suit the person and the situation. They manage flexibly. They often know what inspires the team to greater effort and will assign work according to a person's preferred working style when possible. They understand the pressures on their team and look for ways to keep the team on track. In short they build rapport with the team.

Some of the techniques they use include active listening, setting goals, showing appreciation and encouraging regular informal feedback[13]. When feedback is given and received often and respectfully it becomes a normal part of work life. It no longer feels daunting. Feedback given at the right time can also improve people's performance and help them solve problems. It becomes future oriented, rather than backward looking. Always remember to keep file notes about your initiatives and how the team members respond.

If you have a difficult person in your team, there are some additional techniques you may wish to use. Paradoxically these techniques will make you a better manager and instil a positive work environment.

why do I need to manage difficult people differently?

Do you have someone in your team who is often in conflict with you or other team members, who has a tendency to publicly criticise others when things go wrong but who rejects any constructive feedback themselves? Then you need to manage them differently.

Difficult people are often unaware of the effect of their high conflict behaviour on colleagues. They find it difficult to form positive relationships in the team because of their lack of self-awareness and inability to regulate their emotions or behaviour.

Difficult people are not difficult all the time and not difficult with everyone. They may not display high conflict behaviour to the powerful or to those who control access to the powerful, discretionary benefits or other resources.

As their manager, you may experience their high conflict behaviour or it may only be displayed to your staff. In contrast, your manager may have quite a different impression of the person concerned.

Difficult people sometimes attract protectors from within the organisation. These may be based upon a special relationship or the person's perceived expertise or productivity. While the person may have skills that are desirable to the organisation and achieve high output, the question must be asked, at what cost? Managers have a duty of care to the person but also to the rest of the team.

If it is true that the least agreeable team member influences team performance most strongly then it is important to address high conflict behaviour early before any further damage is done[14].

13 State Services Authority 2010, *Feedback Matters: Effective Communication is Essential*

14 M Kusy & E Holloway 2009, *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and their Systems of Power*

giving feedback

Difficult people often react emotionally rather than logically to situations. They are quick to take offence at even the most carefully worded feedback. Their aggression and accusations are likely to trigger a similar response in us if we're not on our guard. So the first important tip is to remain calm. This is likely to have a calming effect on the person as well.

New kid on the block

Rob is new to the organisation. Although he is an experienced facilities manager with a good track record, he is still settling into his new role and learning about the way things are done.

In contrast, his colleague Pete has been employed in the same organisation for most of his career and regards any departure from standard procedure as a mistake. Instead of helping Rob settle into his new job, Pete complains to anyone who will listen that he has had to undo Rob's mistakes and wonders aloud why he was appointed over existing employees when he is clearly incompetent. Most of Rob's "mistakes" are just a different way of achieving the same outcome, and in some instances are even an improvement on existing procedures.

Pete's malicious gossiping is having a negative effect on team morale and Rob's confidence. Staff have begun to take sides and productivity is suffering. Their manager knows the situation can't continue and decides to counsel Pete about his behaviour.

Start with the positive and focus on the person's strengths. For example, the manager might say something like: 'Pete, you've been working with us for some time and really know the ropes. I'm always confident that you will prevent any mistakes from getting through'.

Describe the behaviours that have caused the problem. Be as specific as you can. Rather than talk about Pete's gossiping in general, say: 'lately I've heard that you're complaining about Rob's work to his colleagues. How did that come about?'

Avoid saying anything that is likely to trigger defensiveness.

Avoid	Statements that are likely to trigger defensiveness
Drawing inferences	You can't deal with change. You want everything to remain the same.
Being sarcastic	Of course, you would never make mistakes.
Making absolute statements	You're always gossiping.
Using judgemental language	You've forgotten what it's like to be new to an organisation.

Explain why the behaviour is a problem. Draw on feedback and reports you have received from members of your team, your own observations and the public sector values or your organisation's values. You might say: 'it takes a bit of time to settle into a new job and learn the ropes. Sometimes we have to give people a bit of slack, help them along a bit and give them feedback. It helps them feel a part of the team'.

Listen attentively to the person's views about the situation and take notes. Encourage them to acknowledge that there is a problem to be solved and together brainstorm some solutions. Working with the person in this way is likely to build rapport and move them into a problem solving mindset. Be firm but respectful.

Outline the next steps. Set the person some SMART goals, meet with them regularly to monitor progress and be firm about the consequences of not changing their behaviour.

Here are the SMART goals that Pete's manager has set for him:

SMART goals	What they mean	Examples
Specific	Multiple examples of observable behaviours including the opposite of what has been observed to date.	Give people direct feedback. Write a checklist to help people avoid making mistakes. Help people undo and learn from their mistakes. Be open to other ways of doing things.
Measurable	An increase or decrease in intensity or frequency.	An increase in timely and respectful feedback to colleagues. A stop to gossiping.
Achievable	Within the person's capacity to achieve.	Pete has a lot of knowledge about the organisation's processes that he could pass onto others.
Results oriented	Connects with the person's real work and is of value to the organisation.	The goals play to Pete's strengths and will lead to better teamwork.
Time specific	Timeframe for change.	Within the next six months.

Make sure the consequences are within your authority to follow through on if the behaviour persists. The consequences might include a formal warning, disciplinary action or in extreme cases termination of employment.

know when to seek help

Changing the behaviour of a difficult person can be very hard to achieve, and this may be your first experience with such a person. They, on the other hand, may have been using conflict for most of their lives to avoid taking responsibility for their actions or to manipulate people to get what they want. Find out from your organisation what resources you can draw on to help you manage the difficult person concerned.

The resources might include a high conflict specialist to guide you through the process and allow you to develop your skills and confidence in talking to difficult people. If you are a member of a peer group or have a mentor, you can use them as a confidential sounding board to test out your ideas and discuss your experiences. You can also talk to your HR department for advice and assistance.

Working with a difficult person can be very draining both physically and emotionally and leave you little time to manage the activities of the rest of the team. In those situations it may be preferable to engage a professional coach to work with the person, leaving you to manage the rest of the team. The coach would regularly brief you on the person's progress without disclosing confidential information about their sessions together.

reinforcing the values in performance management

Respect is perhaps one of the most important values to promote in your team. You could ask your team to say what respect means to them and then include the behaviours in their performance plan. For example, respect might mean giving feedback directly to people. It might also mean giving people the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong and helping them to succeed.

Difficult people often reject feedback because of their unreliable self-assessment. They blame others when things go wrong and are oblivious to the impact of their own actions. If possible, consider introducing 360 degree feedback into your team to help the person understand their effect on colleagues and to help them develop new behaviours. Under this system feedback is sought from a number of people who have a vested interest in the person's performance. The feedback should be balanced, covering the person's strengths, their areas of growth and needs for improvement. The feedback should be for development purposes only, not for appraisal, and not made public.

A professional coach can discuss the trends in the feedback with the person and invite them to look for feedback that corroborates their viewpoint, the critical actions they need to take to improve on other areas, and the help they need from others.

what if the behaviour doesn't improve?

After taking part in a structured performance management process, some difficult people either realise that they cannot adjust their behaviour or don't believe they should. In this case they may decide to leave the organisation or seek employment elsewhere. Continue to manage their performance until their departure.

If they ask you to be their referee, give them and any potential employer factual information[15]. Be clear about what you would say in response to their likely question: 'What would you say about me?'

Sometimes the difficult person is highly resistant to change but doesn't leave the organisation. In these circumstances you have a few options. You can consider whether it is feasible for the person to continue working in your team. Are team members willing to adjust their expectations of the person and is there any opportunity for establishing a productive working relationship? If the answer to these questions is no, can the person be reassigned to a new role that maximises their strengths but minimises their negative impact on others? Again, if the answer is no, you might want to consider terminating the person's employment. Check with your employee relations officer. Terminating a person's employment is time consuming. It must be fair and follow due process.

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15 Harmers Workplace Lawyers 2011, *Employers Advised to be Cautious When Providing References*

what needs to happen after the difficult person has left?

Even after the difficult person has left the organisation, their legacy might persist in the adaptive behaviours the team has learnt to cope with the person's high conflict behaviours. Listen to your staff, acknowledge their concerns but encourage them to focus on rebuilding the team culture not on complaining about the person who has left. Get them to commit to one or two core actions that will make a difference to team culture.

Team members may benefit from professional counselling provided through your organisation's employee assistance program. They will be able to work through any feelings of anger or frustration they may still have.

Continue to model the behaviours you expect of staff and to reinforce application of the public sector values or your organisation's values in daily work.

Tips

- Model the behaviours you expect of colleagues and reinforce the values in daily work.

- Listen to staff concerns about a difficult team member. The high conflict behaviour the person displays may not be targeted at you but still be having an impact on the work of the team.

- Remember you have a duty of care to all members of your team, not just the difficult person.

- Learn to remain calm in the face of hostility and aggression. Don't get hooked into high conflict.

- When giving feedback, start with the difficult person's strengths, set concrete behaviourally specific goals and use language that is unlikely to trigger a defensive response.

- Seek out advice from a mentor, peers, HR or a high conflict specialist when you need help. Dealing with a difficult person is the responsibility of everyone in the organisation, not just you.

- Remember to document and follow up.

B.1 identifying high conflict applicants

When a manager is seeking to fill a vacancy in their team, they will want to select someone who is both able to perform the work and contribute well to the team.

Team harmony is important for getting work completed and having staff members collaborate with one another. While debate can be constructive and lead to better decisions, people who frequently engage in high conflict behaviour can have a negative impact on the team. They can damage relationships with staff members and make it difficult for the team to complete work.

While we are all capable of exhibiting high conflict behaviours on occasion, those with a predisposition to act in a high conflict manner are more likely to have:

- Rigid and uncompromising thinking and actions
- An inability to accept or heal from loss
- Negative emotions that dominate their thinking
- An inability to reflect on their own behaviour
- Difficulty empathising with others
- Preoccupation with blaming others.

These recruitment and selection tips should be read in conjunction with other State Services Authority guidelines and the organisation's HR policies and practices. They are designed to help managers and selection panels identify applicants who are predisposed to high conflict behaviours.

asking behavioural questions at interview

Short listed applicants are typically invited to attend a structured interview. During the course of the interview they are asked a series of behavioural questions that are based on the job's key selection criteria (KSC). For example, if a KSC is to have managed a contract, the applicant might be asked to describe the major challenges they had in managing a contract. In this way each applicant can demonstrate how they meet the KSC through their past behaviours and experiences. Past behaviour is regarded as a good predictor of future performance[16].

The interview is a good opportunity not only to assess applicants' knowledge and skills but also their attributes. A predisposition to high conflict behaviour would be an example of an undesirable attribute in the workplace.

Following on from the example given, the panel might ask each applicant how they have resolved any disputes with a contractor. The applicant's answer is likely to reveal whether they were able to defuse the situation or whether the dispute escalated or was left unresolved.

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16 State Services Authority 2007, *Best Practice Recruitment and Selection Toolkit,* State Services Authority 2011, *24 Recruitment Myths and Facts*

sample questions

While the selection panel will want to ask applicants questions based on the KSC for the particular job being filled, they may wish to use these sample questions as a starting point for developing their own.

about the applicant

Why are you thinking about changing jobs?

- **Tests**: An applicant's interest in the job being offered and how it relates to their career aspirations and talents.

- **Listen for**: Dissatisfaction with their current work or their manager, colleagues or clients.

How would your manager, peers and staff describe you?

- **Tests**: An applicant's self-assessment of their values and strengths.

- **Listen for**: Arrogance and self-importance.

persuasion

Have you ever had to persuade a colleague to accept an idea that you knew they would not like? Describe the resistance you met and how you overcame it.

- **Tests**: An applicant's ability to think about an issue from another person's perspective and then to use this knowledge to persuade them to change their mind.

- **Listen for**: Reliance on authority or domineering behaviour to push through change rather than on logic and persuasion.

Describe a decision you made that was unpopular and how you handled its implementation.

- **Tests**: An applicant's ability to understand why a decision might be unpopular and how they found a way to win support for it.

- **Listen for**: A tendency to criticise people for holding a view different from theirs and to disregard their opposition.

conflict

Describe a situation where you did not agree with something your manager asked you to do and how you resolved the problem.

- **Tests**: An applicant's willingness to constructively raise concerns with their manager.

- **Listen for**: Anger, frustration, resignation or subterfuge.

Tell me about an experience in which you had to speak up in order to be sure that other people knew what you thought or felt.

- **Tests**: An applicant's confidence in expressing their ideas and feelings to colleagues.

- **Listen for**: A tendency to see themselves as a victim of circumstances.

Describe a situation where you had a conflict with another individual and how you dealt with it.

- **Tests**: An applicant's ability to actively resolve conflicts with colleagues.

- **Listen for**: An inability to reflect on how they might have contributed to the conflict and how they share an equal role in resolving it.

flexibility

What was the biggest challenge about working cooperatively with someone who did not share your views, ideas or interests?

- ■ **Tests**: An applicant's ability to work with someone who is different from themselves.

- ■ **Listen for**: An inability to find common ground or to adapt their personal style to others.

Tell me about a situation where you had to adjust to changes over which you had no control.

- ■ **Tests**: An applicant's ability to accept and respond strategically to changes outside their control.

- ■ **Listen for**: Frustration, blaming others and an unwillingness to adapt to changes.

Tell me about a time when you were under considerable pressure to meet one or more goals. How did you cope?

- ■ **Tests**: An applicant's ability to remain calm and focussed under pressure.

- ■ **Listen for**: Feelings of being under stress and unable to cope.

Tell me about a time when you had to deal with an uncertain situation.

- ■ **Tests**: An applicant's ability to continue operating effectively when facts are unknown or circumstances are liable to change.

- ■ **Listen for**: Discomfort with uncertainty and a reliance on standard processes.

resilience

Tell me about a time when your work or an idea you had was criticised. What was your response?

- ■ **Tests**: An applicant's openness to feedback and their willingness to build on the ideas of others.

- ■ **Listen for**: Dismissing the criticism as irrelevant or uninformed.

Tell me about how you dealt with a major setback at work?

- ■ **Tests**: An applicant's ability to persevere and learn from setbacks.

- ■ **Listen for**: Disappointment, vulnerability and blaming others.

What was the most stressful situation you have faced? How did you deal with it?

- ■ **Tests**: The types of situations that the applicant finds stressful and their coping strategies.

- ■ **Listen for**: An inability to cope with uncertainty or differences of opinion.

Describe a situation where you had to exercise a significant amount of self-control.

- ■ **Tests**: An applicant's ability to remain calm and professional in upsetting circumstances.

- ■ **Listen for**: Self-obsession and blaming others.

obtaining candid information from referees

The selection panel may wish to obtain reference checks for applicants that are in strong contention for a job. They might consider obtaining reference checks from a few referees including the applicant's current employer, peers or subordinates and also from past employers to get a rounded impression of the applicant[17].

The selection panel would need to seek the applicant's permission before contacting any referees not nominated by them; doing otherwise would breach the applicant's privacy. However an applicant who does not give a legitimate reason for failing to nominate a recent employer as referee may have some work issues worth exploring.

Reference checks are commonly conducted on the telephone to:

- Confirm employment dates and other details given by the applicant

- Get a second opinion on an applicant's claim against the key selection criteria (KSC)

- Review an applicant's previous job performance

- Gauge an employer's willingness to rehire the applicant.

Employment dates and other details such as role titles and responsibilities are objective information that is easily validated.

The applicant's claim against the KSC is best tested using similar behavioural questions to the interview. The referee's answers will help validate the applicant's answers to the same questions. The referee can also be asked to answer any concerns the panel has about the answers the applicant has given. For example, the applicant may have claimed to have a leading role in a project when they had a minor role.

An applicant's previous job performance is more subjective. The referee may be asked about the quality of the applicant's work, their conscientiousness, leadership or teamwork. The selection panel may ask if the applicant is a team player. Have there been complaints about them? Are they respectful of others' views and opinions? Do they take direction, advice and guidance?

Perhaps the most revealing question the referee can be asked is 'would you rehire this person?' It is extremely important that referees give honest feedback about applicants, covering both their strengths and any shortcomings.

other State Service Authority resources

This guide should be read in conjunction with:

- *Best Practice Recruitment and Selection Toolkit*

- *Mastering the Art of Interviewing and Selection*

- *24 Recruitment Myths and Facts*

17 State Services Authority 2011, *24 Recruitment Myths and Facts*

Tips

- Read through the *Best Practice Recruitment and Selection Toolkit* and other recruitment guides for help with deciding on the key selection criteria, writing job advertisements, conducting interviews and obtaining reference checks.

- Include some behavioural questions in the interview that test for high conflict behaviours. Use the key selection criteria and the sample questions provided in this guide as your starting point. Many jobs now include criteria such as 'team work' or 'good interpersonal skills'.

- Pay attention to your gut feelings. If an otherwise good applicant doesn't seem right for your team, ask them probing questions, invite them to a second interview or test your concerns with their referee.

- Look for patterns of high conflict behaviour in the applicant's responses to your questions.

- Ask referees about how the applicant relates to others, works in a team and responds to direction and feedback.

These tips will help you from inadvertently protecting a difficult person in your organisation. Difficult people are damaging in an organisation if they are not managed well. Their high conflict behaviours create a tense and unproductive work environment. They blame others when things go wrong and take no responsibility for their own actions.

do you have a special relationship with them?

Difficult people are not difficult all the time and not difficult with everyone. If you have a special relationship with them, are in a position of authority or can give access to preferred work, you may never experience their high conflict behaviours. However you may hear reports from other people about the difficult person's behaviour that are worth investigating.

do you believe their skills warrant special treatment?

Some difficult people can be highly skilled and very productive. If they hold specialist knowledge, they may even seem to be indispensable to the organisation. These people often get away with treating their colleagues very badly. No matter how skilful or productive the difficult person may be, there is a cost to the organisation. People who are treated badly will lose their self-esteem, become less effective to the organisation, take more time off and be more likely to resign. Consider the benefit of the difficult person's skills against the cost of their behaviour to the organisation. No one is indispensable but you may need to mitigate the risk of losing their skills.

does the person seem like a victim to you?

Difficult people are very good at portraying themselves as the victim when their own behaviour may have contributed to their problems. Before deciding the facts of the case, make sure you hear both sides of the story. Talk to colleagues. They may have a good idea of what is going on in your team.

do you feel like stepping in to protect them?

Difficult people are often highly emotional and irrational. This can make you feel that you want to protect them. However, if you continue to think about the situation logically rather than respond to the difficult person emotionally, you might find certain aspects of their story to be implausible and worth further investigation.

Tips

- Defer judgement until you hear both sides of the story and have researched the situation.

- Think logically rather than react emotionally to the difficult person's account of the situation.

- Take complaints about the difficult person seriously even if they don't seem to be difficult to you.

C.1 transforming conflict

Conflict is uncomfortable. When people are in conflict they are not at their best. They may be upset and unable to think clearly or to express themselves. They may behave badly towards the other person and say or do things that they later regret. They may feel defensive and suspicious of the other person's motives.

Final draft

Jack and Ted are working together on a planning report.

Jack sighed: Another late and badly written draft from Ted. 'I'm really disappointed in you Ted. This draft is useless. It would be quicker if I just wrote the entire report myself. I don't know why you're on this team. It's certainly not for your writing skills.' Ted is taken aback: 'I'm sick of you always having a go at me. Just because you don't like my writing style doesn't mean the report isn't any good'.

By this time both men are red in the face with anger and storm off in different directions. Jack considers Ted to be lazy and not pulling his weight on the team. Ted sees Jack as rigid and bossy.

Conflict can damage relationships. People get stuck and are often unable to work through the issues themselves. They may need to talk it over with their friends or manager, or to work with a mediator, an independent and trusted third party[18].

There are many types of professional mediator; the two main types are facilitative and transformative. Facilitative mediators regard conflicts as a clash of individual needs and interests. They seek to help people settle their dispute by negotiating an outcome that satisfies those conflicting needs and interests. Transformative mediators believe people have an innate capacity to solve their own disputes. They seek to strengthen people's individual autonomy and social connection, and see their role as supporting positive shifts in the interaction between people. This guide covers transformative mediation.

While it may be a relatively simple matter to resolve a particular dispute, it may not lead to better relationships in the long term and so may not be sustainable. The dispute may be a symptom of underlying problems between the two people. If the mediator has directed them to a solution, they may be unhappy with the outcome or unable to address their differences without the aid of a third party in the future. In the case of Jack and Ted, a solution might be to provide training in report writing to Ted and for Jack to be more precise about what he wants from a report.

18 Read State Services Authority 2010, *Developing Conflict Resilient Workplaces* or join the SSA's Conflict Management Network (email info@ssa.vic.gov.au)

Stuck for words

Ted was proud of his writing skills, liked to appeal to people's emotions in telling a good story and had had a couple of articles published in *The Age*. But lately he had begun to doubt his skills. After the fifth draft of his section of the report, he had developed writer's block. He dreaded giving anything to Jack and so continued to procrastinate. He believes Jack is trying to undermine him, to make him look foolish.

The team is under a lot of pressure to deliver the report on time. Jack knows the project sponsor is looking for hard data and doesn't have time to read through a lot of padding. 'Why doesn't Ted understand the realities of report writing? Why does he insist on filling every report with motherhood statements?' Jack feels so exasperated with Ted that he would rather write the entire report himself.

Jack and Ted are stuck. They seek the help of a transformative mediator, Hillary, who convenes a meeting with them. Hillary explains the process, follows their discussion wherever it leads and supports the positive shifts in their interaction. She does this by:

- Supporting a constructive conversation between Jack and Ted from the outset

- Supporting them to gain clarity, think things through, and make their own decisions

- Supporting them to act on their own behalf and pursue their goals

- Supporting opportunities for them to understand one another

- Supporting them to discuss their differences

- Highlighting decision points.

Hillary does not direct the discussion. She allows Jack and Ted to be silent or to show their anger or frustration. She follows all that is happening closely, attends to the interactions and intervenes in supportive ways. Initially Jack and Ted don't look at each other. They speak to Hillary about their feelings of the situation and each other's motives. The conversation meanders from the current problem to deeper issues and back again. Hillary listens carefully to the conversation, reflecting back what Jack or Ted has said, summarising their exchanges, inviting further discussion on a topic they have raised, checking what they want to do at decision points in the conversation and staying out of the conversation when Jack and Ted are directly speaking to one another.

As the conversation progresses, Jack and Ted begin to speak more calmly, to clarify their own feelings and beliefs and to speak to one another rather than to Hillary. As they feel stronger and more autonomous, they become more open to the other person's perspective. As the mediation draws to a close they feel better about their relationship and have decided on what is needed to improve conditions at work.

At any time in the conversation, either Jack or Ted could have withdrawn from the mediation. They were in control of the process at all times. Through the mediation they have developed skills that they can use to foster good working relationships.

I can see clearly now

Jack understands how Ted uses stories to amplify an idea, and thinks about where this type of skill might best be used. He acknowledges that some of the changes he made to the drafts were not substantive and were demotivating to Ted. He realises that he can't assume that Ted would know what was needed in the report and agrees to be more explicit.

Ted promises to be more open to feedback about his work and to vary his style depending on the audience and the situation. He will seek early guidance from Jack when he is stuck and unsure of what to write. He is now more aware of the pressures that the team is under and how a late report compounds those pressures.

about transformative mediation

The effectiveness of transformative mediation has been validated by both qualitative and quantitative research in a number of settings including the US Postal Service[19]. Its use has been extended from dispute resolution to team building and organisational change. This is unsurprising since its principles are suited to a broader application:

- Conflict is caused by a breakdown in communication. The mediator's role is to move the parties from alienating and unproductive interaction to satisfying and constructive interaction.

- The parties can move at the pace they set for themselves, and decide on the topics they want to discuss. They can see the immediate relevance of the discussion to their work.

- The parties have the expertise and knowledge to decide on the outcomes best for them. Any attempt of the mediator to direct their decisions is counter-productive.

- The process of mediation provides a model for future interactions. It encourages the parties to become self-confident and to be open and responsive to others.

- The principles not only apply to mediation but can also be used in everyday conversations.

The Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation provides training and accreditation in the technique, and a list of qualified mediators. The National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Council also provides a list of accredited mediators working in Australia.

The State Service Authority convenes a Conflict Management Network that is open to anyone working in the Victorian public sector who has an interest in developing their skills in conflict resolution and prevention. Most of its members are Human Resource Managers with an interest in topics such as dealing with high conflict behaviours. They particularly value the advice they receive from guest speakers.

Mediation is not suitable for all types of dispute. For example, those involving criminal activity require investigation and referral to the police. Check your organisation's dispute resolution processes for other examples.

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19 J Folger, R Bush and D Noce (eds) 2010, *Transformative Mediation: A Sourcebook*

Tips

- Recognise when you can resolve a dispute with someone and when you need help from a trusted friend, HR or an independent third party.

- Consider engaging a transformative mediator or applying the principles of transformative mediation in your daily work.

- Understand that many conflicts arise from a breakdown in communication and can lead people to become self-absorbed and alienated.

- Learn to be comfortable with emotions, your own and others.

- Practise active listening, reflecting back what has been said, summarising the discussion and clarifying points.

- Strike a balance between your own needs and your concern for others.

- Remember that some conflict will be experienced as bullying even if it doesn't meet the definition of bullying under occupational, health and safety legislation.

C.2 how best to respond to conflict

People are likely to come into conflict when they have different opinions about something they care about. In the workplace this may be the allocation of resources, the setting of priorities, deciding which facts bear on a case or which strategy to support.

If conflict is not managed well it can quickly degenerate into deadlock, inaction and at times personality attacks. The long term effects of badly managed conflict are lost productivity, sick leave and turnover.

Conflict can get in the way of people accomplishing their work and achieving goals. They become less engaged in the work of the organisation, less likely to cooperate with one another and lose their sense of being part of a team. As conflict becomes entrenched they may seek to avoid the situation altogether, staying away from work.

Being in conflict with someone can feel uncomfortable. This section is intended to help you understand the five different approaches you can take to managing conflict, when each is appropriate and how to apply each one skilfully. As your confidence grows, you will find that conflicts with your manager, peers, staff or clients can be resolved constructively.

conflict is a natural part of life

People differ from one another in a number of ways. They have different perspectives, experiences and knowledge. So conflict is inevitable but, as you will see, not unwelcome. It is the way in which conflict is managed that makes the difference.

Destructive conflict should not be tolerated in an organisation. When conflict is personalised it leads to hurt feelings and animosity. It can worsen the situation.

Conflict can however be resolved constructively when people focus on the substantive issues rather than on personalities, and apply the 'firm flexibility' rule[20]. By this we mean firmly stating their concern but being flexible about how it can be satisfied.

Working 9 to 5

Carla is Matthew's manager. She wants Matthew to work standard hours but he has just been selected for an amateur basketball competition and wants to leave work early two days a week for the next month. Carla is concerned that Matthew won't be able to complete all his work if he leaves early and her first response is 'no'. Matthew is concerned that he won't be in proper form for the competition if he doesn't get in enough practice and he is starting to feel resentful.

They discuss their concerns with each other and agree that Matthew will complete some of his work after hours in the lead up to the competition. Had Carla enforced her decision without explanation or Matthew left work early without Carla's permission, the dispute might have escalated to a formal complaint or disciplinary action.

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20 D Pruitt and J Rubin 1986, *Social Conflict Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement*

Imagine a situation where there is no conflict. People think very similarly and agree quickly on the action to take. However without dissenting viewpoints they may not make the best decision. Work in the Victorian public sector is increasingly complex. Being able to draw on different perspectives and opinions will improve the quality of decisions as all relevant issues are considered and incorporated in the decision making process. People will feel their views matter and work relationships will benefit from a culture of openness and trust.

managing conflict is everyone's concern

Everyone has a role to play in managing conflict in their organisation. By reading this guide or completing the *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*[21], you can better understand your approach to managing conflict and how it differs from that of your colleagues.

Managers have a particular role to play in managing conflict. They can help create an open culture in their team by modelling good practice, encouraging debate, feedback and critical thinking, and listening for and eliciting divergent views from their staff.

Some of the areas in which managers may encounter conflict at work include setting priorities, enforcing behavioural standards, managing performance and introducing change. While their role gives them the power to make unilateral decisions, there are good reasons for them to be more collaborative. Staff are more likely to accept their manager's decision if they explain the reasons for it, and more willing to contribute their ideas if there is openness to feedback.

Managers should encourage but not take responsibility for solving disputes between staff. Taking responsibility for their role in a dispute and its resolution is an extremely important skill for staff to develop.

Staff who coordinate or participate in cross functional teams must find ways of satisfying their concerns without damaging trust or relationships. They often cannot rely upon formal authority and may be making decisions in a conflict situation.

Frontline staff should be encouraged to raise concerns with their manager or colleagues. Often they are reluctant to do so, either avoiding a situation or accommodating the views of others.

five approaches to managing conflict

In any conflict situation, a person may choose to give greater weight to satisfying their own concerns (assertiveness) or satisfying the concerns of others (cooperativeness). Thinking about these two factors of assertiveness and cooperativeness we can define five approaches to managing conflict:

- Competitive (assertive and uncooperative)

- Collaborative (both assertive and cooperative)

- Compromising (intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness)

- Avoiding (both unassertive and uncooperative)

- Accommodating (unassertive and cooperative)

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21 https://www.cpp.com/products/tki/index.aspx
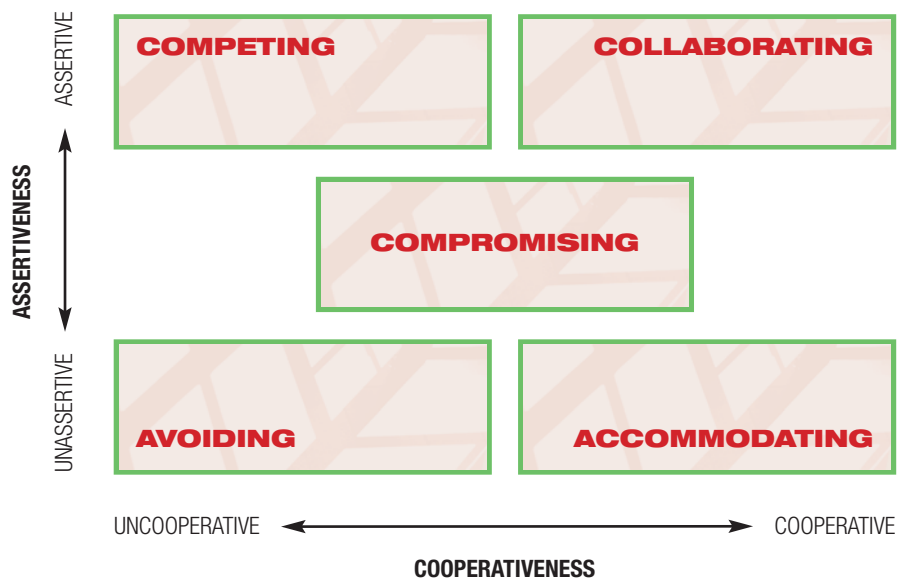
Source: *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*

People are capable of using any of these styles interchangeably depending on the situation but will probably have a preferred style that has worked well for them in the past and that they feel comfortable using. It is common for senior staff to prefer competition and collaboration and for junior staff to prefer avoidance and accommodation.

Identifying your preferred approach

When you find yourself disagreeing with other members about a project, you:

- Try to show the logic and benefits of your view (competing).
- Attempt to work through your differences so everyone is satisfied (collaborating).
- Try to meet others half way in negotiating a solution (compromising).
- Go along with the group if it is important to them (accommodating).
- Decide that your differences are not worth worrying about (avoiding).

Preferences may change over the course of a person's working life. They become more proactive in raising their concerns and less likely to take any dispute personally.

selecting the right approach for the situation

Each approach has its strengths and is well suited to particular situations and less suited to others:

- The competitor seeks to have their concerns addressed at the expense of others. A competitive approach is suitable when quick decisive action is vital or consensus has failed. It is less effective when the competitor actively blocks the team's decision, monopolises discussion or doesn't listen to other viewpoints.
- The collaborator seeks to satisfy their concerns and the concerns of others. A collaborative approach is suitable when incorporating different perspectives in a decision could lead to

a better solution and greater commitment. It is less effective when the collaborator over analyses problems, could readily make the decision themselves or has insufficient time to reach consensus.

- The compromiser seeks to find an acceptable solution that partially satisfies both people's concerns. A compromising approach is suitable when people are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals or must make a decision under time pressure. It is less effective when they lose sight of the larger issues at stake or agree to a compromise that results in unintended costs and inefficiencies.

- The avoider seeks to sidestep the conflict without trying to satisfy either person's concern. Avoidance is suitable when the issues are relatively unimportant, personal risk is involved or postponement would allow more information to be gathered. It is less effective when the avoider withholds information, misses meetings or doesn't return phone calls or emails.

- The accommodator seeks to satisfy the other person's concerns rather than their own. An accommodating approach is suitable when building goodwill with others or learning from them. It is less effective when the accommodator doesn't contribute their valid ideas to the discussion or the other person doesn't have all the facts or is wrong.

Try completing the *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*[22] and then reading the *Introduction to Conflict and Teams: Enhancing Team Performance Using the TKI*.

skilfully applying the approach

Conflict can be resolved when the right approach is selected for a particular situation and skilfully applied:

- The competitor will avoid the potential for damaging relationships and having people withdraw their support if they explain the reasons for their concerns and listen to the concerns of others. If they have authority, they may decide to impose a decision having considered the other viewpoints.

- The collaborator will build trust by setting up the right conditions for collaboration to occur. This includes clarifying each person's underlying concerns and brainstorming alternative solutions that satisfy everyone. They need to realise when consensus has failed and a decision must be made.

- The compromiser can offer concessions without looking weak if the impasse in negotiations is seen as a shared problem, and the concessions are fair and reciprocated. Compromise is often used when competition or collaboration has failed.

- The avoider can postpone consideration of an issue without looking evasive if they give their reasons for the postponement and set a time to get back together. The issue may be relatively unimportant, there may be insufficient time or more information may be needed.

- The accommodator can concede in a way that preserves goodwill and their credibility by being gracious and explaining their motives for the concession. They may have been wrong about an issue, persuaded to change their opinion, over ruled or outmatched. Sometimes small concessions are necessary to preserve goodwill and keep work on track.

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22 https://www.cpp.com/products/tki/index.aspx

Breaking the anger cycle

Emotional conflicts 'personalise' the conflict and create defensiveness and hard feelings. You can break this destructive cycle by managing your behaviour at key points:

- Learn not to be easily upset or hurt by another's comments.
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt and don't assume their motive is to harm you.
- Avoid labelling the other person and focus on their behaviour instead.
- Use humour to defuse the situation.
- Vent your anger by discussing the situation with someone you trust.

working in teams

When individuals work together they form a team. Individuals in a team will have a preferred style of managing conflict that is not necessarily the same as their colleagues. While this can lead to clashes and misunderstandings, it is important for them to remember that each of the five styles has positive underlying values and each contributes to the work of the team. Competitors advocate positions that have merit, collaborators find win-win solutions, compromisers provide moderation and balance, avoiders manage time costs and accommodators build goodwill and cohesiveness.

Understanding the intentions and contributions of each style reduces resentment and makes it easier for team members to listen to others and learn from them.

The team also has a preferred style of managing conflict determined by the dominant style of its members, particularly the formal leader and any influential members. Their preferences shape the culture of the team, how it operates and how it is experienced. Competitor teams engage in robust debate and can appear intense. Collaborator teams seek consensus, listen to one another and build on others' ideas. They can appear exploratory and open minded. Compromiser teams negotiate to find an acceptable solution and can appear pragmatic. Avoider teams screen out or postpone discussion and can appear cautious. Accommodator teams support and protect their members and can appear pleasant and safe places to work.

Understanding your team's conflict style can help set the ground rules and compensate for any disadvantages from its overuse[23].

Tips

- Consider using the *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* at your next planning day or team building exercise.
- Become comfortable with conflict at work but always discourage personality driven conflict.
- Recognise your preferred approach to conflict and where it is most effective.
- Practise using other approaches to conflict where your preferred approach would be less effective.
- Watch out for tension between team members whose approach to conflict clashes, and encourage understanding.
- Identify your team's preferred style of management and any disadvantages this might present.

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