Today, we’re going to talk about resolving workplace conflict and building consensus.

Workplace conflict may be based on disagreements over work procedures, different needs and interests, clashes of personalities, or a range of other situations and circumstances that lead to confrontations between or among employees.

Management experts estimate that most supervisors and managers spend as much as a quarter or more of their valuable work time managing conflicts. When you know how to resolve workplace conflicts effectively, you can save time and turn potentially destructive situations into positive, productive opportunities for growth and development within your work group.

Additionally, when you know how to build consensus among employees, you can enhance motivation and cooperation as well as create an atmosphere in which agreement generally prevails over conflict.
The main objective of this session is to help you manage conflict and build consensus among employees successfully. By the time the session is over, you should be able to:

- Recognize the impact of workplace conflict;
- Identify common causes of conflict;
- Understand how positive communication helps prevent conflict;
- Resolve conflicts successfully; and
- Build consensus among employees.
Before we begin the session, let’s take a few minutes to see how much you already know about conflict resolution and consensus building. Decide whether each statement on the screen is true or false.

Now, let’s go over the answers:

• Workplace conflict is always bad.
  • This is false.
• Conflict is always based on personality clashes between employees.
  • This is also false.
• There is little you can do to prevent workplace conflict.
  • Again, false.
• And finally, the best way to deal with conflict is to ignore it.
  • This is also false.

How did you do? Did you get all the answers right?

If not, don’t worry. You’ll learn all about these issues and a lot more during the session.
Conflict is a disagreement. It is a dispute with others. It generally involves the clash of interests, ideas, or personalities.

It’s important to realize that conflict is inevitable. Whenever and wherever people work or live together, there are going to be occasional disagreements. That’s because conflict is a normal part of human life. People have different personalities, points of view, ideas, needs, and so forth. Those differences sometimes clash and that leads to conflict.

Conflict can arise within groups or between individuals. Conflict can be professional and focus on work issues, or it can be personal and arise out of the interaction of different personalities.

It’s also very important to realize that conflict is not necessarily destructive. It can be productive and lead to improved relationships or innovative ideas. It all depends on how you deal with it.

All conflicts can be resolved if you manage them properly.

Think about conflicts you’ve dealt with among your employees. What started these conflicts? How did you resolve them?
When workplace conflict is well managed, it can have constructive outcomes.

- Well-managed conflict can spark creativity and challenge employees to think about what they are doing and how they might improve methods and procedures.

- When employees disagree about how things should be done, the debate can lead to better products and services for customers—and that can make for a more successful, competitive organization.

- In an atmosphere that acknowledges and manages conflict effectively, healthy competition among employees can exist without becoming destructive.

- In such an atmosphere diversity can also flourish, and employees from different backgrounds can present and promote their ideas. All points of view can be heard and appreciated.

Think about these potential benefits of constructive conflict and how they can benefit your department. Can you think of other potential benefits of well-managed conflict?
When workplace conflict is not well managed, however, it is likely to have a destructive influence. Poorly managed conflict among employees may lead to:

- Reduced productivity;
- Lower morale;
- Increased absenteeism, as employees seek to avoid a hostile and uncomfortable work environment;
- Greater turnover, as workers leave to find jobs in organizations where conflict is well managed;
- The “wildfire” effect, with one conflict leading to others and spreading out of control within groups and between departments; and
- An increased potential for violence.
There are numerous potential causes of workplace conflict.

- Poor communication inevitably leads to misunderstandings, and misunderstandings often lead to conflict.

- Employees with dissimilar work styles may come into conflict when they have to work together. Each one thinks that his or her way is “right” or “best.”

- As in every other aspect of life, people with different personalities sometimes clash on the job.

- Different goals can also lead to workplace conflict. Some employees may think that their work objectives are more important than those of their co-workers. They may believe their goals deserve priority, or they may simply not understand their co-workers’ goals.
• Conflict often arises out of other differences as well. For example, different needs may lead employees to compete for resources, recognition, raises, promotions, and so forth. This can often lead to conflict.

• Conflicts may arise among employees with different functions as well. Where job functions overlap or come into contact, territorial disputes may arise or competing interests may conflict.

• Employees may have different perceptions of situations, policies, and so forth. And these differing viewpoints can lead to disagreements about what should be done and how it should be done.

• Employees may also respond to different pressures. For example, pressure to perform, pressure to achieve results, pressure to meet demanding schedules, and so on. These pressures can often bring employees together in confrontational situations.

Can you think of some other causes of workplace conflict based on your own experience dealing with it?
In any workplace conflict, you and your employees have basically five options.

- You can try to avoid the issue and hope it goes away, which it rarely does. It usually only gets worse.
- Another option is for one person or group to surrender to another and give in to what the winner wants.
- Employees can compete with one another to see who dominates. But this usually ends up in a win-lose situation, which can lead to renewed conflict at a later time.
- Alternatively, you can get employees to negotiate a compromise, with each side giving up some of what it wants to make peace. Or you can encourage employees to collaborate, working together to develop a mutually agreeable result—in other words, a win-win solution. As you can imagine, this is generally the most productive way to deal with conflict.

When those in conflict can’t collaborate to develop a mutually beneficial solution to their conflict, compromise can be a good fallback. None of the other options, however, are effective if your goal is to manage workplace conflict successfully. Evasion, surrender, or competition inevitably lead to renewed conflict.
When you are faced with a workplace conflict, review this conflict assessment checklist before you take further action.

• First, determine who is involved in the conflict. It might involve more people than you think. It might involve people from different parts of the organization. Find out just how extensive the conflict is.

• What are the circumstances? Is there an underlying power struggle between departments? Is there a diversity issue underlying the conflict? Is a professional difference of opinion at the core of the disagreement?

• Why is this particular conflict occurring? Think about the common causes of workplace conflict we just discussed.

• And finally, is there a policy that covers the situation? Organizational policies can sometimes help you resolve conflicts because they often address areas of potential conflict.
• You also want to ask yourself whether you should intervene in the conflict. This is a very important question. Sometimes it may be better to let employees work things out on their own—if you think there’s a good chance that they can.

• What would be the consequences of not intervening? If failure to act might lead to destructive conflict or fuel other conflicts, you must intervene.

• Who can you consult and ask for advice? Perhaps your boss can help. Or maybe you have a colleague whose judgment you trust on these issues. If you’re in any doubt about how to proceed, talk the matter over with someone with experience handling conflict successfully.

• Finally, ask yourself what a good resolution of this conflict would look like. Is it possible to craft a win-win solution? How?

Can you think of some other issues you generally consider when faced with a conflict on the job?
One of the best ways to minimize the chance of destructive conflict in your department or work group is to teach your employees to communicate more effectively. Good communication begins with sending clear messages. Here are some helpful strategies that you can teach your employees.

- Take the time to sort out exactly what you want to say. Know your thoughts and feelings on the subject.
- When speaking, use first-person statements, such as “I think,” “I believe,” “I need,” etc., as a way to take full responsibility for your position.
- Avoid finger-pointing, such as “You always do that,” “You never follow through,” “The trouble with you is…”
- If you have to deliver a difficult message, before you speak to the person who needs to hear your message, make notes, talk into a tape recorder or in front of a mirror, or discuss the issue with someone who can be objective. That way, you’ll be sure it comes out right when you say it.
Another important part of sending clear messages is honesty. Tell the truth as you see it, simply and professionally.

Provide complete information. Use the old who, what, when, where, and how formula.

Try to phrase your statements positively. For example, “I think it would be good if we could” instead of “How come you don’t,” or “Why can’t you.” Or try saying, “We need to…” instead of “This isn’t working.” Using “we” implies that you are onboard the team and not an individual taking potshots at other individuals.

Avoid all the patterns that imply you or your viewpoint is superior, such as judging, criticizing, name-calling, diagnosing, patronizing, ordering, threatening, moralizing, or dismissing the other person’s concerns as unimportant.
Workplace conflicts often arise because people fail to listen to co-workers and really hear what they have to say. Here are some strategies for better listening that you can teach your employees.

• Don’t interrupt. Give others the time they need to say what they have to say.

• Pay attention and avoid distractions when another person is talking to you. Don’t sit there pretending to listen while really preparing your comeback.

• Be open and receptive. Don’t jump to conclusions or make assumptions. Stay focused on issues, not personalities.

• Look at the person who is speaking to catch all the nonverbal cues to meaning—for example, gestures, tone of voice, body posture, and facial expressions.
• Show by your own eye contact, body posture, and gestures that you are listening and following what the other person has to say.
• Use your imagination to try to put yourself in the other person’s position to understand his or her point of view.
• Ask questions to clarify points you don’t understand. But be careful not to interrogate. And hold your questions until the other person has finished speaking.
• Restate what a person has said to make sure you understand and that you both agree on what was said.

Have you taught your employees good communication skills? It’s worth taking the time to do so. Good communication skills can prevent conflict.
Let’s take a minute now to see what you’ve learned about conflict resolution from what we’ve discussed in the previous slides. Decide which items will help you manage conflict.

If you checked every box, you are on the right track to effectively managing conflict. Congratulations!
Now it’s time to ask yourself if you understand all the information presented in the previous slides about workplace conflict. For example, do you understand:

- What conflict is?
- The benefits of constructive conflict?
- The damage that can be caused by poorly managed conflict?
- Basic options for addressing conflict?
- The conflict assessment checklist?
- Communication skills that can help employees prevent conflict?

It’s important to understand all this information so that you can work with your employees to prevent conflict on the job.

Let’s continue to the next slide now and talk about the conflict resolution process.
Now let’s look at a simple eight-step conflict resolution process that you and your employees can use to resolve any type of workplace conflict.

- Step one is to call a meeting with all the individuals involved in the conflict. Make sure you include everybody involved. If you leave anyone out, the conflict cannot be effectively and permanently resolved.

- Step two is to establish discussion rules. For example, “The goal is to find a mutually acceptable solution.” Or, “It’s OK to express thoughts and feelings openly as long as you are respectful of one another.”

- Step three is to define the problem clearly in terms of needs. Each party to the conflict must have a full opportunity to define needs in terms the others can understand. This takes time and patience. The key to resolving conflict often comes when people recognize what they actually need, as distinct from what they would merely like.

- Step four is to develop possible solutions that will meet the needs of both—or all—parties involved in the conflict. You may have to get the ball rolling by making suggestions of your own. But once employees are talking, let them offer their ideas. Show your openness to employees’ suggestions by not evaluating ideas immediately.
• Step five is to select a mutually beneficial solution from among those suggested. Remember, the best solution—a lasting solution—is one that meets the needs of each party as far as possible. Try not to impose a solution, but rather, guide the employees involved to make the best choice themselves.

• Step six is to develop an action plan—who will do what, by when, and how to implement the resolution of the conflict. This is a vital step. Without it, conflict could easily flare up again.

• Step seven is to implement the plan and monitor the plan in action. Don’t just walk away thinking the plan will work. Check to make sure it does.

• Step eight is to evaluate the conflict resolution process in general and the resolution of this conflict specifically. Did the process yield an effective, positive result? Were employees involved satisfied with the resolution? Will your efforts help to eliminate or at least minimize this type of conflict in the future?

Think about the steps you take to resolve conflicts among employees and the effectiveness of your efforts to date.
Recurring conflicts are particularly difficult to handle. They often involve a number of employees and some deep and bitter feelings. Such conflicts involve patterns of behavior that may have been going on for a long time—perhaps even before you came on the scene. Open conflict flares up from time to time and then things calm down again. But the basic reasons for the conflict are never resolved. Recurring conflicts can be highly destructive and must be dealt with for once and all.

- Your first step when you encounter a recurring conflict is to identify all participants. Often these “wars” involve a number of employees. You need to identify the foot soldiers as well as the leaders on both sides.
- Speak to each employee involved individually and try to find out exactly what the conflict is about from each person’s perspective. You’ll likely gain a lot of interesting and useful information this way.
- When all employees involved have been interviewed separately, bring them all together to discuss the problem. Encourage all to say exactly what’s on their minds, but require them to be professional and respectful in the way they express their thoughts and feelings.
- Summarize your understanding of the underlying conflict, and ask employees to correct you if you have misinterpreted anything.
• Next, talk about how employees can recognize signs that conflict may be about to break out yet again.

• By recognizing these signs they can take steps to break the cycle of conflict.

• Talk about how this might be done. For example, they can use the eight-step conflict resolution process we discussed earlier. If they are not already familiar with this process, teach it to them and practice with them.

• Finally, monitor the situation closely until you are convinced that the cycle truly has been broken and the pattern of conflict has been changed to one of discussion of issues, working through problems, and cooperation.
Personality conflicts are another special case. These conflicts can be especially difficult to resolve. This type of conflict often becomes more emotional than rational. The work issues the employees claim to be fighting about usually have little or nothing to do with the cause of the conflict. Keep these special considerations in mind when trying to resolve a personality conflict between employees:

• Make sure both employees understand that they are valuable to you, their co-workers, and the organization. This is a critical first step that helps to build self-esteem and enhances the ability of both employees to address their problems in a positive, professional way.

• Explain how the conflict is affecting work—the employees’ performance, other employees, the department’s productivity, and so forth. Try to de-emotionalize the issues and appeal to their sense of professionalism and pride in their jobs.

• Give them the chance to work things out and come up with a mutually acceptable resolution to their conflict. You can either let them do this privately—if you think they can work things out without coming to blows—or you can mediate and help them work through difficult issues.
Once a solution is agreed upon, get a firm commitment from both employees that they will adhere to the agreement and try to get along better in the future. In some cases, the most realistic solution is simply to acknowledge that the employees will agree to disagree but treat each other professionally and respectfully.

Monitor the situation closely for a while until you are convinced that the employees are working together without conflict.

Should the solution fail, take necessary action to ensure that future conflict doesn’t negatively affect other workers and your department. In the worst cases, this might involve a transfer for one or both employees, progressive discipline, or even termination if no other possibilities exist to restore peace to the workplace.

Think about some of the personality conflicts between employees that you have had to deal with. How did you resolve the problem? What could you do in the future to improve the process?
Now let’s look at the other side of the coin—teaching and encouraging employees to seek agreement instead of resorting to conflict.

Consensus is general agreement. It reflects group solidarity in thinking and/or feeling on an issue. Consensus building in the workplace is the process by which sincerely held core agreement is reached among a group of employees.

- In order to be effective, it must be inclusive and acknowledge the views of all members of the group.
- It usually requires skillful facilitation by a leader. Normally, that’s you, the supervisor or manager.
- Unfortunately, consensus can be reached only for specific decisions. It can’t be created once and for all as a general climate of agreement.
- However, a successful experience with consensus building can enhance overall motivation and teamwork, creating an atmosphere in which agreement generally prevails over conflict.

Think about how you build consensus and how this helps avoid conflict and encourage productive, cooperative interaction.
There are five basic building blocks for creating consensus.

• First, clearly define the issue around which you are seeking consensus. It’s essential to make sure that everyone is focused on the same issue.

• Next, establish ground rules for the discussion of the issue. The purpose of these rules is to make sure that all points of view are voiced and thoroughly considered. You want to encourage 100 percent open participation and discourage premature criticism or domination of the discussion by a few. The most effective rules are developed by the group itself under your leadership.

• Then, get the honest views of all members of the group. Be sure not to take silence as agreement. Draw out the views of quiet or previously critical members.

• At this point you should be ready to reach agreement—in other words, to seek consensus. Don’t accept agreement too quickly, however. Make sure people are agreeing for the right reasons, not because they feel pressured or just want to “get it over with.”

• Finally, create a final statement summarizing the decision made by the group. Each member should be able to recognize a key point that was important to him or her in the final statement. This recognition strengthens commitment and confirms acceptance of the decision.
Here are some common mistakes supervisors and managers make when trying to build consensus among employees.

- Failing to clearly define the issue to be agreed upon can lead to lack of focus, wasted time, and a flawed result.
- Not establishing fair and effective ground rules for discussion can also waste a lot of time and damage the integrity of the process.
- Failing to include all points of view in the final statement is also fatal to the consensus building process. Remember that each group member must be committed to the result.
- Bargaining with dissenters doesn’t create consensus. That’s negotiation and compromise. And that is another process completely. Remember that consensus is general agreement reflecting solidarity among the group. Be patient and keep working until you’ve got true agreement.
- And finally, pushing your own ideas too much can lead to a result in which there is no true agreement, just a lot of nodding heads who are agreeing under what they may view as pressure from above.
Now let’s see if you remember the steps in the conflict resolution process that we discussed earlier in the session. We identified eight specific steps. See how many of those steps you can remember.

Now, let’s go over the answers. The eight steps we identified in the conflict resolution process are:

• Call a meeting;
• Establish rules;
• Define the problem;
• Develop solutions;
• Select the best solution;
• Develop an action plan;
• Implement & monitor the plan;
• Evaluate process & result.

How did you do? Did you remember all eight steps? Your approach to conflict resolution may be a little different and involve additional steps. But this is the basic process that will yield the best results.
Let’s take a moment now to review to see if you understand all the information presented in the previous slides about conflict resolution and consensus building. For example, do you understand what we’ve said about:

• The conflict resolution process?
• Resolving recurring conflicts?
• Mediating personality conflicts?
• What consensus is and why it’s important?
• Basic building blocks for consensus?
• Common mistakes when building consensus?

It’s important to understand all this information so that you can successfully manage workplace conflict.

Let’s continue to the last slide and some key points to remember.
Here are the key points to remember from this session on conflict resolution and consensus building:

- Workplace conflict is inevitable and normal, but it doesn’t have to be destructive.
- By effectively managing conflict, you can create a positive, productive atmosphere that encourages discussion and allows for diverse views to be heard.
- Building consensus can lead to genuine agreement and commitment to group success.

This concludes the Conflict Resolution and Consensus Building training session.