

Managing Conflict in a Virtual Setting

ALL EMPLOYEES

Working in a virtual environment can be challenging. Without the presence of body language and tone, the risk of misinterpreting a teammate's communication goes up. To avoid inadvertently stirring up conflict on your team, consider the tips below.

Tips to Prevent Conflict when Working in a Virtual Environment

Assume positive interactions

Start by assuming your colleague has good intentions. Because you are relying on written words, sometimes it can be easy to misread or misinterpret what others are trying to say.

Plan to connect

Out of sight, out of mind definitely applies. The opportunity to pop into someone's workspace to have a quick conversation does not exist in the same way. This may take additional planning, so set up a 15-30 minute conversation. Chances are, you will end up discussing something important.

Be patient with different communication styles

People may have a communication style that is different from yours. We know that 60-70% of communication is non-verbal, which means we are even more reliant on our past conditioning and likely to use implicit bias. Learn more about implicit bias and how it may affect you [in this short video](#).

It is better to over communicate

Try not to assume what others know. For example, while others can tell people are running late for a physical meeting, virtual team members are left guessing. If you're running late for a virtual meeting, send a quick note (over email or Google chat) so they know when to expect you.

No need to overthink it

Virtual teammates often miss out on pleasantries like “Good morning. How was your weekend?” Be mindful of when you last spoke with your virtual teammate. Send a note on [Google chat](#) to ask how they are doing. A quick “hello” can go a long way and help colleagues feel connected and included.

Tips for Dealing with Conflict in a Virtual Environment:

Even with the best preventable techniques, conflict may still happen. When you need to have a challenging conversation, there are several things you can do.

Prepare for the conversation

Having difficult conversations is hard to do successfully under the best of circumstances. When you must have that conversation virtually, a little extra preparation can go a long way toward making the interaction feel more like it would if you were in the same place at the same time. [Use this tool to help you prepare.](#)

Maintain visual contact if possible

When having emotionally difficult conversations, choose a video conference. It is best to be able to make contact with the person you are talking to, and to present information in a caring manner. Also try to keep your environment free from distraction so you can concentrate on the conversation itself.

Act on your concerns

The “24-hour” rule still applies. If you are feeling upset or disturbed about a communication you received, take the appropriate time to process, reflect and reply when you are able to do so respectfully.

Speak calmly and respectfully

When emotions are running high, we can say things that are mean and hurtful. When we lash out, we are physiologically experiencing a threat and our body is responding with a fight or flight response. You have the ability to re-engage the reasoning part of your brain by asking yourself a question such as “What am I really angry about?”, “Am I *reacting* or *responding*?” or “What might be happening for the other person?”.

RESOURCES:

[Giving & Receiving Feedback in the Workplace](#)
[Unconscious Bias at Work — Making the Unconscious Conscious](#)
[Google Apps and G Suite](#)

FOR LEADERS

Leading a team in a virtual environment can be challenging, but there are many things you can do as a leader to prevent conflict.

Tips for Minimizing Conflict on your Team in a Virtual Environment:

Have regular team meetings

Even though we cannot physically meet face-to-face, regular meetings via video messaging can be very effective. Continue your meetings on a regular schedule, and it will soon feel normal.

Prioritize one-on-one meetings with your employees

Regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings can be just as effective through a video conference as they are face-to-face. This is your opportunity to check in with each member of your team, which is especially important when working remotely.

Lead from the front

It is important that you model the behaviour you would expect to see from your team. If you see employees trending toward [yellow zone behaviour](#), have a respectful one-on-one video conversation with your employee. Ask them questions to understand their perspective, and remind them that a respectful workplace is a shared responsibility.

Use the round table method during your meetings

Some of your team members may not actively jump into conversation, but may have something important to add. If you don't call on them, they may begin to think that you do not value them. By closing your meeting with a round table, everyone has an opportunity to ask any questions, provide clarity, or share items about the topic of the meeting. While this may take more time, it will be worth it.

Let team members know that you are available to meet

Make it clear that you are available to answer questions just like you would be if you were in the office. While it may seem obvious to you, your employees may not make this assumption. Clarify the best way for them to reach you (email, Google Chat, or phone).

Take time to celebrate success and provide recognition

Celebrating success and providing recognition gives team members a positive reason to stay connected, and will help your team feel valued.

Set clear expectations

It is especially important that you are clear with your expectations. However, keep in mind that while you will not physically see how busy your employees are (as you would in an office environment), they may have other competing priorities. Have conversations about workload and be flexible with timelines when it makes sense.

Ask questions and read cues for discomfort or disagreement

It is important to be alert for subtle clues of discomfort during meetings. Asking clarifying questions helps. For example: What are your thoughts on this?

Encourage self care

Leaders should remind team members to prioritize self care (taking breaks in particular). It is easy for team members to stay at their computers for long periods of time, fearing they could miss an important hangout call, email, etc.

RESOURCES

[Giving & Receiving Feedback in the Workplace](#)
[Respectful Workplace - Behaviour Zones](#)