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Any scenario in which you live, work, and collaborate with others is susceptible to conflict. Because workplaces are made up of employees with different backgrounds, personalities, opinions, and daily lives, discord is bound to occur. To navigate it, it's crucial to understand why it arises and your options for resolving it. Common reasons for workplace conflict include: Although conflict is common, many don't feel comfortable handling it—especially with colleagues. As a business leader, you'll likely clash with other managers and need to help your team work through disputes. Here's why conflict resolution is important and five strategies for approaching it. Free E-Book: How to Become a More Effective Leader Access your free e-book today. DOWNLOAD NOW Why is Addressing Workplace Conflict Important? Pretending conflict doesn't exist doesn't make it go away. Ignoring issues can lead to missed deadlines, festering resentment, and unsuccessful initiatives. Yet, according to coaching and training firm Bravely, 53 percent of employees handle "toxic" situations by avoiding them. Worse still, averting a difficult conversation can cost an organization \$7,500 and more than seven workdays. That adds up quickly: American businesses lose \$359 billion yearly due to the impact of unresolved conflict. As a leader, you have a responsibility to foster healthy conflict resolution and create a safe, productive work environment for employees. "Some rights, such as the right to safe working conditions or the right against sexual harassment, are fundamental to the employment relationship," says Harvard Business School Professor Nien-hé Hsieh in the course Leadership, Ethics, and Corporate Accountability. "These rights are things that employees should be entitled to no matter what. They're often written into the law, but even when they aren't, they're central to the ethical treatment of others, which involves respecting the inherent dignity and intrinsic worth of each individual." Effectively resolving disputes as they arise benefits your employees' well-being and your company's financial health. The first step is learning about five conflict resolution strategies at your disposal. Explore how to approach conflict in the workplace in the video below, and be sure to subscribe to our YouTube channel for more explainer content. View Video While there are several approaches to conflict, some can be more effective than others. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model—developed by Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas and Dr. Ralph H. Kilmann—outlines five strategies for conflict resolution: Avoiding Competing Accommodating Compromising Collaborating These fall on a graph, with assertiveness on the y-axis and cooperativeness on the x-axis. In the Thomas-Kilmann model, "assertiveness" refers to the extent to which you try to reach your own goal, and "cooperativeness" is the extent to which you try to satisfy the other party's goal. Alternatively, you can think of these axis labels as the "importance of your goal" and the "importance of this relationship." If your assertiveness is high, you aim to achieve your own goal. If your cooperativeness is high, you strive to help the other person reach theirs to maintain the relationship. Here's a breakdown of the five strategies and when to use each. 1. Avoiding Avoiding is a strategy best suited for situations in which the relationship's importance and goal are both low. While you're unlikely to encounter these scenarios at work, they may occur in daily life. For instance, imagine you're on a public bus and the passenger next to you is loudly playing music. You'll likely never bump into that person again, and your goal of a pleasant bus ride isn't extremely pressing. Avoiding conflict by ignoring the music is a valid option. In workplace conflicts—where your goals are typically important and you care about maintaining a lasting relationship with colleagues—avoidance can be detrimental. Remember: Some situations require avoiding conflict, but you're unlikely to encounter them in the workplace. 2. Competing Competing is another strategy that, while not often suited for workplace conflict, can be useful in some situations. This conflict style is for scenarios in which you place high importance on your goal and low importance on your relationships with others. It's high in assertiveness and low in cooperation. You may choose a competing style in a crisis. For instance, if someone is unconscious and people are arguing about what to do, asserting yourself and taking charge can help the person get medical attention quicker. You can also use it when standing up for yourself and in instances where you feel unsafe. In those cases, asserting yourself and reaching safety is more critical than your relationships with others. When using a competing style in situations where your relationships do matter (for instance, with a colleague), you risk impeding trust—along with collaboration, creativity, and productivity. 3. Accommodating The third conflict resolution strategy is accommodation, in which you acquiesce to the other party's needs. Use accommodating in instances where the relationship matters more than your goal. For example, if you pitch an idea for a future project in a meeting, and one of your colleagues says they believe it will have a negative impact, you could resolve the conflict by rescinding your original thought. This is useful if the other person is angry or hostile or you don't have a strong opinion on the matter. It immediately deescalates conflict by removing your goal from the equation. While accommodation has its place within organization settings, question whether you use it to avoid conflict. If someone disagrees with you, simply acquiescing can snuff out opportunities for innovation and creative problem-solving. As a leader, notice whether your employees frequently fall back on accommodation. If the setting is safe, encouraging healthy debate can lead to greater collaboration. Related: How to Create a Culture of Ethics and Accountability in the Workplace 4. Compromising Compromising is a conflict resolution strategy in which you and the other party willingly forfeit some of your needs to reach an agreement. It's known as a "lose-lose" strategy, since neither of you achieve your full goal. This strategy works well when your care for your goal and the relationship are both moderate. You value the relationship, but not so much that you abandon your goal, like in accommodation. For example, maybe you and a peer express interest in leading an upcoming project. You could compromise by co-leading it or deciding one of you leads this one and the other the next one. Compromising requires big-picture thinking and swallowing your pride, knowing you won't get all your needs fulfilled. The benefits are that you and the other party value your relationship and make sacrifices to reach a mutually beneficial resolution. 5. Collaborating Where compromise is a lose-lose strategy, collaboration is a win-win. In instances of collaboration, your goal and the relationship are equally important, motivating both you and the other party to work together to find an outcome that meets all needs. An example of a situation where collaboration is necessary is if one of your employees isn't performing well in their role—to the point that they're negatively impacting the business. While maintaining a strong, positive relationship is important, so is finding a solution to their poor performance. Framing the conflict as a collaboration can open doors to help each other discover its cause and what you can do to improve performance and the business's health. Collaboration is ideal for most workplace conflicts. Goals are important, but it's also important to maintain positive relationships with co-workers. Creative collaboration will never be possible to find creative solutions to problems. If you can't generate a win-win idea, you can always fall back on compromise. Considering Your Responsibilities as a Leader As a leader, you must understand your own conflicts but help your employees work through theirs. We'd going so, remember your responsibilities to your employees—whether ethical, legal, or economic. Leadership, Ethics, and Corporate Accountability groups your ethical responsibilities to employees into five categories: Well-being: What's ultimately good for the person Rights: Entitlement to receive certain treatment Duties: A moral obligation to behave in a specific way Best practices: Aspirational standards not required by law or cultural norms Fairness: Impartial and just treatment in the course, Hsieh outlines three types of fairness you can use when helping employees solve conflicts: Legitimate expectations: Employees reasonably expect certain practices or behaviors to continue based on experiences with the organization and explicit promises. Procedural fairness: Managers must resolve issues impartially and consistently. Distributive fairness: Your company equitably allocates opportunities, benefits, and burdens. Particularly with procedural fairness, ensure you don't take sides when mediating conflict. Treat both parties equally, allowing them time to speak and share their perspectives. Guide your team toward collaboration or compromise, and toward a solution that achieves the goal while maintaining—and even strengthening—relationships. Are you interested in learning how to navigate difficult decisions as a leader? Explore Leadership, Ethics, and Corporate Accountability—one of our online leadership and management courses—and download our free guide to becoming a more effective leader. One of the most common behavioral interview questions is: "How do you handle conflict with a coworker?" or, "How do you handle conflict in the workplace?" Employers may also ask for a specific example of a time you had a workplace conflict and how you responded (with a question beginning with, "tell me about a time...") So I'm going to show you how to answer ALL possible questions about disagreements at work... with word-for-word examples, mistakes to avoid, and more. There are a couple of key things you should make if you want to get hired (and a couple of things you NEED to avoid) so make sure you read until the end. Let's get started. Why Employers Ask Questions About Conflict at Work? Employers ask interview questions about conflict and disagreements at work for a few reasons. First, they want to see if you're able to communicate effectively, with coworkers, with your boss/manager, etc. Good communication can prevent common disagreements, and can also always stop a disagreement from escalating or becoming a bigger issue. Next, they want to make sure you stay calm and professional when dealing with conflict at work. The last thing they want to do is hire someone who's difficult to work with, hot-headed, and will turn small issues into bigger ones. So that's why employers want to see that you can communicate well. They want to see that you leave your ego behind and are willing to compromise and work with others to keep the company running smoothly. So when they ask this question, they're evaluating your communication and listening skills, your patience, and your ability to understand the other person's perspective. And then, employers want to see you're capable of finding a resolution or compromise that's in the company's best interests (even though it's not always what you personally wanted). Example Answers to "Tell Me About a Conflict or Disagreement You Had With a Coworker" If they ask for a specific time you had a conflict or disagreement with a coworker, then you need to be ready to share a story. (This is the classic format of most behavioral interview questions, where the interviewer says, "Tell me about a time when...") So to prepare, think of one specific disagreement or conflict so that you're ready for interview questions about the topic. Try to pick a story where you: Were able to solve the disagreement and come to a positive outcome Learned something from the experience that you can share with the interviewer Didn't cost the company much time or money; you don't want to share a massive conflict that harmed your company in a huge way Example answer #1: "In my last job, I reached out to a potential new client via email. I didn't know that one of the other sales associates on the team had already been talking to this person. My coworker was initially upset, but I explained that the system hadn't shown me that this contact had been handled. They had forgotten to log the activity so I had no way of knowing. Once I shared my point of view, they understood that it was an honest mistake. We decided it would be fair to split the commission 50/50 for this new client, so we proposed this idea to our team, and she agreed that this was a fair compromise. We ended up landing the client and they became one of our biggest clients." Example answer #2: "When I was new in my last position, one of the senior members of our team showed me a process to follow. I didn't follow it as closely as I should have, and my results weren't great because of it. A month later, he confronted me and asked why I wasn't following what he had shown me. I apologized and told him that I understood why he was upset. Then I worked with him to make sure I understood what to do moving forward. From this mistake, I've learned to trust my senior team members and use the resources and people around me rather than trying to figure everything out on my own. And I learned that if I don't understand a process or why it's important, I can ask a question or two. But if I don't communicate, nobody can help me. Because of this experience, I communicate better and use the resources around me to be more productive in the workplace. That coworker ended up being one of my closest colleagues in that last job, and I became one of the top performers on our team that year." It's always good to end your story on a positive note and show how you ended up turning it into a positive. So that's why that same answer above concludes by talking about how you became a top performer at the company. That's going to eliminate any concern they have that you'll have similar issues working with them. You never want to name a weakness or challenge that leaves them wondering if you're just going to struggle in their job, too. Example Answer for "How Do You Handle Disagreements and Conflict at Work?" Along with asking for a specific story or example from your past, they may just ask something like, "how do you solve workplace conflicts?" In this case, you can describe your overall approach to resolving conflict without sharing a specific story. Here's a simple way to answer, "how do you handle conflict?" "When faced with a conflict, I like to ask questions and understand my coworker's perspective. This helps keep the situation calm, helps them feel like they're being heard, and after this, I've found it's much easier to come to an agreement or compromise while both staying a lot calmer." Note: It's still okay to share a specific story after this if you want. To do this, you'd start with the sample answer above, but you'd go on to say, "For example, in my last job, I had a conflict with a coworker, and then tell them about a time you used the tactics you described to resolve a conflict. Even though this is a bit more than they asked for, it can help reinforce the point that you're trying to make. Some hiring managers will appreciate this, and it's a good way to set yourself apart in your answer. Top Traits to Show When Answering Questions About Conflict Resolution No matter how the employer phrases the question in your job interview, there are some key traits they're always looking for (and some things they definitely DON'T want to hear when asking you how you deal with conflict). So let's cover that now... 1. Show them that you stay calm and that you try to understand the other person's perspective Disagreements happen; it's just a normal part of being in a workplace with other people. But the interviewer wants to see that you don't make the situation worse when it does happen. You'll see this in the example answers above – the sample responses we covered are designed to show employers that as soon as you recognize a conflict has occurred, you try to understand the other person's perspective, act logically and reasonably, and deal with the conflict quickly before it becomes worse. Show an ability to compromise and an ability to stay clear-headed when you deal with conflict, and you'll get more job offers. That brings me to my next key point... 2. Show them that you think logically and don't take things personally or get too emotional This is true when answering, "how do you make important decisions?" also. Employers want someone who will act reasonably and look at the information available so they can make the best decision based on logic and reason. So show them that you use facts and logic to decide what to do. This will make them feel that you're predictable and won't act impulsively, which can be dangerous for a company (and can scare them away from hiring you). 3. Show them that you keep the company's best interests in mind You can see this in the first example from earlier in the article. The situation was that you and another sales associate were both chasing after the same lead (and trying to earn a commission from "closing" that lead and turning them into a client). The WORST thing you could say here is that you lost the lead or didn't end up succeeding in bringing them in as a client because of the internal conflict. So, you always want to share a story where you kept the company's best interests in mind and took action to prevent it from becoming a bigger disagreement or problem. Follow the Steps Above and You'll Have a Great Answer to Interview Questions about Workplace Conflicts If you prepare a specific story for how you handle conflict AND prepare to talk about your general approach to conflicts, you'll be ready to give an impressive answer to this type of interview question. Remember to always show the hiring manager that you are: Calm under pressure A logical and reasonable person Ego-free and focused on what's best for the company Good at communicating, listening, and compromising when necessary... And show that you learned from the experience and used it to improve. If you use the steps outlined above, you'll impress the hiring manager and be more likely to get hired in your job interview! Conflict is a normal part of working life, and knowing how to handle it is essential. When you face disagreements with coworkers or managers, your ability to resolve these issues can show your skills and character to potential employers. This article will guide you on how to effectively answer the interview question, "How do you handle workplace conflicts?" It will also provide strategies and examples to help you shine during your interview. Key Takeaways Stay calm and composed during conflicts. Listen carefully to understand different viewpoints. Focus on finding solutions that work for everyone. Use the CAR technique to structure your answers. Avoid negative language and blaming others. Understanding Workplace Conflict Types of Workplace Conflict Alright, so workplace conflict is something everyone deals with at some point. It can be as simple as a one-time argument or as complicated as ongoing personality clashes. Here are a few types you might come across: One-time disagreements – A quick spat that usually blows over. Chronic relationship issues – When two people just can't seem to get along, ever. Personality clashes – Different personalities sometimes just don't mesh well. Verbal abuse – When words are used as weapons. Harassment and bullying – Serious stuff that needs addressing immediately. Discrimination – Treating someone unfairly based on who they are. Common Causes of Conflict Conflicts at work can pop up for all sorts of reasons. Here are a few common ones: Different ideas or interests - When people have opposing views or goals. Leadership style disagreements – Not everyone likes the same management style. Poor communication – Misunderstandings happen when people don't talk clearly. Cultural differences – Different backgrounds can lead to different viewpoints. Impact of Conflict on Team Dynamics Conflicts aren't just annoying; they can really mess with how a team works together. If not handled well, they can lead to: Decreased productivity – People spend more time arguing than working. Low morale – Nobody likes a tense work environment. High turnover – Folks might start looking for new jobs to escape the drama. Handling conflict well can actually bring teams closer together, but it takes effort and a bit of skill. Learning to tackle these issues can turn a sticky situation into a chance for growth. Why Employers Ask About Conflict Resolution Revealing Interpersonal Skills So, why do they ask you about handling conflicts at work? Well, it's all about those people skills. Employers want to see if you can keep your cool and work things out with others. Good interpersonal skills mean you can listen, understand, and communicate well with your team. This is super important because it helps keep the workplace running smoothly. See also Brain Teasers You Could Encounter in an InterviewAssessing Problem-Solving Abilities Next, they're checking out how you solve problems. When conflicts pop up, how do you handle them? Employers are looking for someone who can think on their feet and find a solution without making things worse. It's like a little test to see if you can handle the pressure and come up with a plan that works for everyone. Understanding Cultural Fit Lastly, they want to see if you'll fit in with the company culture. Every workplace has its vibe, and employers need to know if you'll mesh with the team. By seeing how you deal with conflicts, they can tell if you're really into the company's culture and how you'll get along with others and contribute positively. Back to Top How to Handle Workplace Conflicts: A Step-by-Step Guide to Resolving Disagreements and Preventing Future Conflicts Effective Strategies for Conflict Resolution Active Listening Techniques So, let's talk about active listening. It's not just nodding your head and saying "uh-huh." It's about really tuning in to what the other person is saying. You want to make them feel heard. Ask questions, repeat back what they've said to show you get it. This can defuse tension and build trust, making it easier to find a solution. Staying Calm Under Pressure Keeping your cool is easier said than done, right? But when things get heated, taking a deep breath before responding can be a game changer. Staying calm helps you think more clearly and keeps the situation from escalating. Try counting to ten or taking a quick walk if you need to cool off. Finding Common Ground Finding common ground is like finding that one TV show everyone in the family can agree to watch. It's about identifying shared goals or interests. This can be the foundation for a solution that everyone can live with. It might take some digging, but once you find it, resolving the conflict becomes way easier. Using the CAR Technique for Conflict Resolution Alright, so let's dive into the CAR technique. It's a handy way to tackle those "How do you handle conflict?" questions in interviews. CAR stands for Context, Action, and Result. Think of it as its your go-to formula for structuring your answers. Context: Setting the Scene First up, you gotta set the stage. Briefly describe the situation where the conflict happened. Keep it short and sweet, like you're painting a quick picture. You want the interviewer to understand what was going on without getting bogged down in too many details. See also What to Bring to a Job InterviewAction: Steps Taken to Resolve Conflict Next, talk about what you actually did. This is your chance to shine, so be specific. Explain the steps you took to handle the situation. Maybe you mediated between team members or came up with a compromise. Whatever it was, make it clear and logical. Result: Positive Outcomes Achieved Finally, wrap it up with the results. What happened because of your actions? Did the team work better together? Did you meet a deadline? Share the positive outcomes and, if you can, throw in some numbers or feedback to back it up. This is where you show how your actions made a difference. So, to sum it up, when you're asked about handling workplace conflicts, remember CAR: Context, Action, Result. It's like your secret weapon for nailing those tricky questions. And hey, if you want more tips on handling difficult situations, check out this guide for some solid advice. What Not to Do When Handling Workplace Conflicts Avoiding Emotional Responses So, you're in the middle of a workplace conflict. First thing, keep your cool. Letting emotions run wild can turn a small issue into a big mess. It's like adding fuel to a fire. Instead, take a deep breath and aim to stay calm. This way, you can think clearly and handle things like a pro. Steering Clear of Blame Pointing Fingers is a No-Go. Blaming others only makes things worse and can damage relationships. It's better to focus on finding solutions, not who's at fault. Try saying, "Let's see how we can fix this," instead of, "This is all your fault." Not Ignoring the Conflict Pretending a conflict doesn't exist won't make it disappear. Ignoring issues can lead to more tension and even bigger problems down the line. Address conflicts early on to prevent them from escalating. It's like fixing a leaky pipe before it floods the house. Deal with it head-on, and you'll save yourself a lot of trouble. Sample Answers to Conflict Resolution Questions So, picture this: you're at work, and there's this co-worker who's always got something to say. Not the good stuff, you know? It's like they're always on edge, and it's affecting the vibe. Here's how you might handle it: Listen Up: First off, try to understand where they're coming from. Maybe they're stressed or something. Stay Cool: Don't let their mood mess with yours. Keep your calm and don't react with anger. Talk it Out: Have a chat. Let them know how their behavior is affecting the team. Use "I" statements, like "I feel..." instead of "You always..." Find a Fix: Work together to find a solution. Maybe there's a compromise you can both agree on. See also How to Describe Yourself Through Others' EyesAlright, so sometimes you and your boss might not see eye to eye. It happens. Here's a way to handle it: Pick Your Moment: Don't bring it up in the middle of a busy day. Find a quiet time to talk. Be Respectful: Remember, they're your boss. Be polite and show respect, even if you disagree. Explain Your Side: Clearly explain your perspective, but also listen to theirs. Open to Feedback: Listen to what your boss has to say. Maybe there's a reason for their decision you didn't know about. Work Towards a Solution: Try to find common ground. Maybe there's a way to meet in the middle. Team Conflicts can be tricky. You've got different people, with different views. Here's a way to manage it: Get Everyone Together: Have a team meeting where everyone can share their thoughts. Encourage Open Dialogue: Make sure everyone feels heard. No interrupting. Identify the Problem: Pinpoint what's causing the conflict. Is it a misunderstanding or something bigger? Brainstorm Solutions: Get the team to come up with solutions together. The more ideas, the better. Agree on a Plan: Decide on a way forward that everyone can agree on. Remember, conflicts are normal, but how you handle them can make all the difference. Keep it chill, be open, and look for solutions. Frequently Asked Questions What is workplace conflict? Workplace conflict happens when coworkers disagree. This can be due to different ideas, interests, or beliefs. It can show up as arguments, ongoing issues, or even bullying. Why do employers ask about conflict resolution? Employers want to know how you deal with conflict because it shows your communication skills and how you work with others. They can learn about your ability to solve problems and fit in with the team. What are some common causes of workplace conflict? Common causes of workplace conflict include differences in work styles, unclear roles, and misunderstandings. Other reasons can be personality clashes or cultural differences. How can I effectively resolve conflicts at work? To resolve conflicts, listen carefully to both sides, stay calm, and look for common ground. It's important to focus on finding a solution that works for everyone. What is the CAR technique in conflict resolution? The CAR technique stands for Context, Action, and Result. It helps you explain a situation by setting the scene, describing what you did, and sharing the positive outcome. What should I avoid when discussing conflict resolution? Avoid blaming others, using negative language, or saying you don't handle conflict well. Don't ignore the problem or go into unnecessary details. When left unchecked, workplace conflict is costly – to the tune of \$39 billion a year in lost productivity. Explore how to prevent workplace conflict and how to resolve it. How to Prevent Conflict in the Workplace Encouraging Collaboration Important to promote a sense of unity and cooperation among your team, consider implementing strategies to encourage collaboration. This could include: Organizing regular team-building activities: Hosting brainstorming sessions to facilitate the sharing of ideas Encouraging open communication, where all opinions are welcome and respected Effective Nonverbal Communication in the Workplace (Examples) Building Trust: Trust is a cornerstone of a positive work environment. Here are some ways you can build trust within your team: Be transparent and open about company decisions, goals, and challenges Encourage honesty and provide a safe space for employees to voice their concerns Recognize and appreciate team members' achievements and contributions As trust builds among team members, they are more likely to approach conflicts with a problem-solving mindset and work to find mutually beneficial resolutions. Learn more: How to Build Trust in the Workplace [18 Effective Solutions] Developing Emotional Intelligence Emotional intelligence is key in understanding and managing feelings, both within ourselves and among others. Consider offering resources and training for your employees to develop their emotional intelligence. This can include: Workshops or seminars on emotional intelligence and communication skills Access to resources like articles and books focused on self-awareness and empathy Encouraging team members to actively practice and improve their emotional intelligence skills in their daily interactions With increased emotional intelligence, you and your colleagues will be better equipped to navigate conflicts, express emotions effectively, and empathize with the feelings of others. What To Do If You Can't Resolve a Conflict When conflicts seem to be beyond resolution through usual communication channels, mediation or seeking third-party assistance can be a helpful strategy. Mediation involves an impartial person who facilitates a constructive dialogue between the conflicting parties to help them find a mutually acceptable solution. Here are some steps to follow when employing mediation in your workplace: Choose a neutral mediator: It's important to select a person who is not involved in the conflict and has no personal stake in the outcome. This can be someone from within the company, an HR representative, or an external mediator. Provide an open forum: Encourage both parties to express their points without interruption, focusing on understanding each other's perspectives. The mediator should listen and not allow personal biases to influence the process. Use active listening skills: Throughout the mediation process, show genuine interest in understanding the concerns of both parties by listening to understand rather than formulating counterarguments. Facilitate collaborative problem-solving: The mediator should work with the disputants to generate potential solutions, encouraging them to think creatively and collaboratively. This process empowers those involved to take ownership of their decisions and may lead to more lasting resolutions. In some cases, mediation might not be sufficient to resolve the conflict, and you may need to seek external assistance. Legal professionals, industry-specific conflict resolution experts, or third-party organizations can be valuable resources in managing complex disputes.