



# Negotiating Personal Conflict

## TIP SHEET

**Personal conflict between team members can lead to communication breakdowns, negative emotions, and strained team relationships, especially when the conflict is expressed in offensive comments or actions. Personal conflict focuses on who someone is rather than what they think or believe. Team members don't need to be friends or even agree on ideas to work together effectively; in fact, there may be people on your team that you feel less comfortable with or even dislike. Addressing conflict with another team member requires self-reflection and effective communication. This tip sheet provides guidance to help teams discourage personal conflict among team members and to help individual team members address conflict with another team member.**

### Part 1: Teams Can Encourage Positive Communication

Team leaders and team members can help to encourage positive communications.

- 1 Set ground rules around how team members express disagreement.** As a team, discuss and decide on ground rules about how to have productive disagreement and discourage personal conflict (see the Setting Ground Rules for Productive Disagreement Activity Guide with Worksheet). These ground rules should be revisited as a team before discussions.

**Try this:** Ground rules are great reminders of how team members can disagree with each other productively. They can focus on both disagreeing with someone and being disagreed with. Some examples are:

- Be specific and give reasons why you disagree.
- Offer revisions or friendly amendments to other's ideas.
- Communicate respectfully – name-calling, insults, or personal criticisms are out of bounds.
- Give the benefit of the doubt; don't assume other people's motives for disagreeing with your idea.
- Recognize that disagreement can be used as an opportunity to clarify or improve an idea.



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**2 Embrace differences in style, background, and perspective among team members.** Leaders should note that team members think, communicate, and solve problems differently from one another, and show how they value those differences. They can make it clear that having members with different experiences, perspectives, and ways of expressing themselves is a benefit to the study. Leaders can also help to bridge or find connections between different viewpoints (see the Valuing All Voices Checklist).

**Try this:** Have team members talk about their background and interests, what motivates them, how they think about things, and their communication style. This could occur early in the study during one of the first team meetings or during a team-building activity. Team members may also want to complete a communication style assessment to identify and discuss the benefits of having different styles on the team.

**3 Invest time in relationship-building.** Most personal conflict is caused by a lack of understanding about who someone is and why they think or act the way they do. Taking time to build positive relationships among team members can help create a team culture of mutual respect and open communication.

**Try this:** Set aside 5 minutes at the start of each meeting – or every other meeting – for pairs of team members to share something about themselves that is relevant to the project or how they work with others.

**4 Set the expectation that team members hold one another accountable for following the team norms.** Encourage team members to speak up when they see behaviors or communication straying from the team norms or ground rules, especially during disagreements. It is important that team members understand that speaking up does not involve accusing or shaming an individual.

**Try this:** Have the team come up with a simple and positive phrase that anyone on the team can say such as “remember our team norms” or “let’s follow our team norms.” All team members should be able to say – and hear – this phrase without having to defend, explain, or identify any individual team member. Everyone then agrees to adjust their behaviors as needed.

### Part 2: Individual Team Members Can Address Conflict Directly

Team members should be able to recognize personal conflict and feel empowered to address it. Individuals need three basic skills to address personal conflict: self-reflection, goal setting, and negotiation.

**1 Self-reflection.** When a comment or behavior triggers a strong emotional reaction, take a moment to think through what you are feeling and why. This can help you decide how to respond.

**Try this:** When a strong emotion is triggered, ask yourself the following questions:

- What am I feeling about this other person?
- What specifically is the person doing or saying that is making me feel this way?
- What assumptions am I making about why the person is acting this way? What might be other reasons for their actions?
- Have I had this kind of reaction before? What was the situation?
- Are there any personal “hot buttons” I might have around these kinds of behaviors? How are those hot buttons adding to my feelings in this situation? (A hot button is an area of sensitivity someone may have that makes them more likely to have a negative emotional reaction.)

You may find that self-reflection is enough to move past the initial negative emotional reaction and refocus your attention. You may also decide that the situation is worth addressing with the other person, even if you recognize that their action might not be the sole cause of your reaction.

**2 Goal setting.** If you’ve decided you’d like to address the conflict with the other person, have a clear set of goals for what you would like to happen. Setting goals may also help you to better understand the root cause of the conflict.

- What do I want to happen that would make me feel better about this situation or person?
- What would help me not have this reaction in the future?
- What am I willing to accept as a substitute or compromise to what I want?
- What am I willing to do if I can’t get the result that I want?
- What do I need to happen to feel that the conflict was resolved?

Review your answers to see if what you want is a reasonable request of someone else. For example, a common response to the first question is “I want you to apologize/admit you were wrong.” You might revise that to: “I’d like you to understand why what you said/did was hurtful to me.”

**3 Negotiation.** Once you have reflected on the source of conflict and determined that it is more than a disagreement of ideas, address the situation outside of team meetings or activities. It is important to avoid statements that may cause the other person to become defensive or make the conflict worse.

**Try this:** A simple technique called “When you, then I” can be used when negotiating conflict. The technique helps each person own their part of the conflict and work together to find a solution that can resolve or reduce the conflict. The technique has three steps.

- **Describe the behavior without judgment.** State what you saw or heard the other person do. Avoid using any language that judges the behavior or makes assumptions about the person.
  - *Example:* When you started talking over me in the meeting, I was not able to finish sharing my thoughts.
  - *Avoid:* You tried to shut me down, thinking what you had to say was more important.
- **Describe the way the behavior affected you.** Be factual and avoid making judgements.
  - *Example:* When you interrupt me, I feel as if my opinion is less important than yours. I feel embarrassed.
  - *Avoid:* You make me feel embarrassed.
- **Make a request.** State directly, but politely, what you want.
  - *Example:* I would appreciate it if I could finish my thought before you respond.
  - *Avoid:* You need to be quiet and let me speak.

From there, you can negotiate how to address the conflict. For example, you may:

- Allow the other person to explain why they behave as they do and decide that you just need to interpret their behavior differently.
- Be able to hear what the other person wants, needs, and is able to provide.
- Compromise, collaborate, or seek third party intervention.

There may be some conflicts that you cannot negotiate on your own. If you feel unable to address the conflict directly or if you feel unsafe, it may be time to bring in a third party to help resolve the conflict.