



## NAVIGATING CONFLICT

Driven by varied perspectives of the same situation, conflict can be inevitable, though not inherently negative. The source of conflict may stem from core needs not being met, a difference of opinions, miscommunications, unclear expectations, inaccurate assumptions, an excessive workload, failed recognition, or rigid beliefs, among other causes. The Chinese character for conflict represents both danger and opportunity. Every instance where conflict arises presents an opportunity to learn, grow, and transform—and to avoid, resist, and blame.

Periods of struggle provide opportunities for growth; trees develop deep roots when faced with wind and drought, and gems are the result of pressure and heat over millions of years. Likewise, appropriately managed conflict enhances creativity and problem solving, increases trust and commitment, leads to a better quality of work, and results in more engaged and satisfied employees. On the other hand, unchecked conflict hurts the individuals immediately involved through unhealthy stress and unresolved issues, decreases the morale of surrounding team members, and can quickly escalate into bigger, avoidable problems.

While some conflict must be immediately reported to Human Resources (such as claims of harassment or discrimination), when challenges arise, supervisors are responsible to identify, address, and reframe issues to create positive outcomes. This includes addressing issues quickly, coaching employees, facilitating difficult conversations, reaching positive solutions, cultivating a culture that invites a diversity of perspectives, and treating everyone with dignity and respect. Considering what may sit under the waterline of the proverbial iceberg of conflict (differences in values, habits, loyalties, fears, historical context, beliefs, or misunderstandings), supervisors can help their team members take healthy risks and sharpen one another's thinking through fruitful dialogue.

### ACT IN MARCH

#### **1** Identify existing conflicts on your team.

Ask individuals about challenges they face to identify conflicts on your team. Also note all issues that detract from your ideal vision of how you would like your team to work. Consider contributing factors, and approach conflict with curiosity: *How have I contributed to this conflict? What else could I have done to navigate the conflict? What else is influencing the conflict? What emotions are under the surface for me and others?*

#### **2** Invite conversation and prioritize listening.

Conflict must be navigated quickly, directly, and with care. While it can be easy to put off potentially uncomfortable situations, avoiding conflict results in a dysfunctional and unenjoyable work environment. Rather than assigning blame, invite each person to a conversation, ask questions to understand their motives and decision-making process, and confirm your understanding of the situation. Approach such conversations with the goals of learning, empathizing, and ultimately making each person stronger by resolving the conflict in a healthy way.

#### **3** Seek solutions together.

Generally, all involved parties will help resolve conflicts (with the exception of addressing policy violations or inappropriate behavior, where supervisors may need to act unilaterally). Symbolically sitting on the same side of the table—looking together at the conflict on the other side of the table—allows parties to work collaboratively and objectively. Propose possible solutions, establish an agreed-upon plan, and define specific commitments each party agrees to meet in advancing the relationships and mission of your team.