



Greater Good in Education

SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

RESOLVE CONFLICT AT WORK

"There are three truths: my truth, your truth, and the truth."

—*Chinese Proverb*

OVERVIEW

Take a walk with the person you are in conflict with to talk about the issue. Practice active listening with the aim of reaching a compromise.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Whenever you are experiencing conflict at work
- To reach a compromise or cooperative solution

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- Adult

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

You will:

- Identify a conflict you need to address
- Strive to reach a compromise or cooperative solution instead of trying to win the conflict
- Practice active listening

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Empathy
- Courage
- Humility

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

How to Do It

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Before you begin, pause and take a few deep, conscious breaths to prepare yourself to begin working through a conflict with a colleague. Think about how you generally approach conflict and whether or not your approach is effective.
- Consider whether the person with whom you have a conflict has a different approach to conflict than your own. This particular practice [favours cultures](#) that are more egalitarian

and less hierarchical, i.e., the goal is to compromise or come to a mutually agreed-upon cooperative solution. Will this practice privilege your values over that of your colleague's? If so, how will you adjust your approach?

INSTRUCTIONS

Consider a conflict, big or small, that you are facing with another person at work. Perhaps you disagree on a new school policy, or maybe you feel your colleague isn't pulling their weight on your team, which is in charge of developing a new curriculum. After identifying the conflict, follow these steps:

- **Choose to actively manage the conflict rather than ignoring it.** When your supervisor makes a decision you disagree with, or a colleague isn't respecting your time, your instinct may be to accommodate their wishes, and ignore your thoughts and feelings on the matter. Instead of avoiding the conflict and allowing suppressed emotions to build inside, decide to take an active approach and address the conflict head-on.
- **Embrace a mindset of collaboration.** If you have an instinct to avoid conflict, it may be the result of a workplace culture where it's normal to keep doubts and disagreements quiet for the sake of reducing tension. Or maybe the norm at your workplace is to aggressively hold your ground until one person "wins" the debate. Instead, the best way to resolve conflict is somewhere in the middle: choosing a collaborative mindset. Collaboration means that individuals feel safe to share opposing opinions and strive for a solution that works for both people.
- **Practice active listening.** In order to have productive discussion, it is important to demonstrate mutual respect for one another. One critical way to do this is to [actively listen](#) when someone is speaking, as opposed to preparing your rebuttal. When both parties feel heard, you can more effectively come to a cooperative solution.
- **Take a walk.** If possible, suggest discussing the matter on a walk indoors or outdoors. As you walk side by side, adjust the pace of your gait to synchronize with your colleague's, a practice that has been [found](#) to encourage collaboration. Consider this walk together to be a constructive opportunity to exchange ideas.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did you feel after engaging in this practice?
- Were you able to make progress in resolving the conflict?
- What parts of the practice felt most natural to you and what parts were most difficult for you?

- What could you change the next time you try this practice again?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [study](#) of students, administrators, and healthcare workers in The Netherlands analyzed the relationship between employee strain—feeling miserable, upset, or worried at work—and styles of conflict management. The researchers found that a passive approach to conflict management amplifies employee strain, compared to an active style of conflict management such as problem-solving.

Furthermore, research finds that [organizations with collaborative conflict styles have greater viability](#), while dominating conflict cultures offer poor customer service, and avoidant conflict cultures show low creativity.

In addition, a [meta-analysis](#) suggests that walking together may aid conflict resolution. In one study referenced, people who were instructed to walk in synchrony were more likely to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of the group, compared to a control group who walked out of synchrony.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Solving conflict at work can be difficult, and time concerns can influence our ability to come to an agreement about how to best serve students. However, in a high-stress environment, strategies to promote collaboration, listening, and cooperation are vital.

[Research](#) suggests that neglecting to advocate for our point of view can increase feelings of distress at work, which is why it's important to be proactive in solving conflict and constructively sharing our opinions. When leaders model and welcome this kind of collaborative approach, it may influence others to do the same, which can improve the school culture and viability.

Choosing to walk as you talk with a colleague can promote this cooperative problem-solving. As your steps synchronize, [research](#) suggests, you may find that the two of you are better able to get on the same page. Walking can help inspire innovative solutions, and allow you and your colleague to move toward a resolution.

SOURCE

Dijkstra, M. T. M., De Dreu, C., Evers, A., & van Dierendonck, D. (2009). Passive responses to interpersonal conflict at work amplify employee strain. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 18*(4), 405-423. doi: 10.1080/13594320802510880.

Gelfand, M. J., Leslie, L. M., Keller, K., & De Dreu, C. (2012). Conflict cultures in organizations: How leaders shape conflict cultures and their organizational-level consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 97*(6), 1131-1147. doi:10.1037/a0029993.

Tinsley, C. (1998). Models of conflict resolution in Japanese, German, and American cultures. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 83*(2), 316–323. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.83.2.316>

Webb, C. E., Rossignac-Milon, M., & Higgins, E. T. (2017). Stepping forward together: Could walking facilitate interpersonal conflict resolution? *American Psychologist, 72*(4), 374-385. doi:10.1037/a0040431.