

Thoughts from your FCH EAP: Workplace Dynamics

Navigating interpersonal disagreements in the workplace can be challenging.

By understanding the roots of conflict, individuals can move beyond automatic, reactive responses and adopt more intentional strategies for resolution, which fosters a healthier work environment. When disputes arise, effective leaders play a crucial role in guiding their teams toward constructive outcomes. They do this by preserving everyone's dignity, listening with empathy to find common ground, and respecting diverse viewpoints as sources of creative solutions.

As always, if you need guidance navigating a challenging team dynamic, your FCH EAP is available 24/7 to consult and support you at (800) 777-4114.

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Tips for Managing Disagreements

Preserve and protect the dignity of all stakeholders, including yourself

In a heated discussion, it's easy to say something demeaning. Keep your focus on issues, not personalities. Until proved otherwise, assume the other person is expressing a legitimate concern when disagreeing. Even if someone who disagrees with you appears stubborn, you won't get closer to resolving a dispute by putting him down. When you show sincere respect for people who disagree with you, they will be less inclined to be defensive.

Listen with empathy

When you listen to others' views, put yourself in their shoes. By doing so, you convey the message, "I respect you as a person. Your thoughts and feelings are important to me whether or not I agree with them." See from the other person's perspective; feel the speaker's emotional state. When ideas conflict with what you already believe, notice if you discount the speaker's message.

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To get the full information that is basic to managing differences, you need to listen with neutrality that suspends critical judgment. Give your full attention to why the other person sees the same situation differently from you. Be receptive to more than the words you hear--they always carry more meaning than their explicit content. When the other person feels heard you will have taken an important, though subtle, step toward resolving your disagreement.

Find common ground

Overarching mutual concern and interest paves the way to move from disagreement to win-win resolution. The only disagreements of any real importance are those that involve people in interdependent relationships. Therefore, inherent in mutual dependence is the existence of common ground. In a dispute, it is tempting to force or expect others to change their basic orientation or behavioral style. People change basic patterns only with difficulty, only where there is trust, and only when they believe it is in their best interest to change. Until trust and respect are established, what helps is a shared larger vision and common long-range goals.

Honor diversity

Different viewpoints spur the creative search for resolution. In contrast, when people converge quickly and reach instant agreement, the process is sterile. Nothing new has been added. Part of managing disagreement is reaching the best solution, not simply conforming to what one person wishes. When you're the lone dissenter, it's tempting to surrender your conviction to conform to more popular views. Your gift to others is your independent point of view. Be firm about the issues that truly matter to you. In addition, respect the interests of all parties involved. Once you learn to add your ideas to the ideas of others, you can develop a more creative, successful resolution. Remember that diversity holds the seeds for constructive change.

Disagreement management styles

A style is a habitual, reactive mode of handling conflict. It is predictable to those who interact with you. A style sometimes fits the situation, and sometimes doesn't. In short, your challenge is to convert styles to strategies.

Disagreement management strategies

Your effectiveness in dealing with conflict depends on making a deliberate choice of converting a style for managing disagreement into a strategy for managing disagreement. Your aim is to choose consciously the approach or combination that works best under each specific circumstance.

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The following strategies highlight neutral styles centered on equality.

- **Deciding by rule**—Make a joint agreement to use an objective rule or criterion as the basis for choosing among specified alternatives, such as a lottery, majority rule, seniority, or policy.
- **Coexist**—Agree to disagree. In this style, the two parties pursue differences independently, and they agree to follow separate paths for a period of time. Use this strategy if two parties of equal power are adamant about the merits of their positions and no other agreement can be reached.
- **Bargaining**—Trade, take turns, or split the difference by each party taking a piece of a difficult task.

The following strategies incorporate flexible styles focused on building trust.

- **Yield**—Apply this strategy when the issue is important to the other person, but minor to you, or you have more to gain by not resisting. This approach can also help preserve the relationship.
- **Release**—Use this if you are in a position of power and there is a low risk of irreversible loss, or an opportunity to encourage another's development.
- **Collaborate**—Use it if the issues are too important to be compromised and commitment is needed. It is useful in team building and strategic decisionmaking, but keep in mind that it requires time, trust, and interpersonal competence.

The following strategies use a firm style to support your position.

- **Maintain**—Strategically wait when you need to collect information, let emotions cool, enlist allies, deal with higher priorities, allow recent changes to stabilize, or let circumstances resolve the issues.
- **Smoothing**—With this strategy, you accentuate similarities and downplay differences. By focusing exclusively on the benefits of your ideas, without emphasizing (or even mentioning) the alternatives, you sell your ideas. Smoothing is useful when you want your preferences to prevail.
- **Dominate**—If you possess, or are perceived to possess, authority or power, you may apply this strategy judiciously to ensure physical safety and well-being. Be aware that overuse of this approach diminishes its power.

For leaders, incorporating these tips can help shift disagreements from a burden to an opportunity for growth and innovation.

FCH EAP | Call us at 800-777-4114

Your Clinical Account Executive supports you when dealing with tough HR situations. Consult with us about referring employees to the EAP. When in doubt, direct employees to call FCH EAP. ***If you or someone you know needs the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, call or text 988 or use the chat function online at 988lifeline.org.***