Managing conflict at work

No one is immune to conflict. Whether at work or at home, in our close relationships or casual acquaintances, the ways you deal with conflict dictates whether it will be stressful or create an opportunity to grow and achieve your goals.

Dealing with difficult people

When workplace conflict is caused by having to deal with difficult people, there are things we can do to improve the situation. For example:

1. **Attempt to understand the difficult behaviour.** Perhaps the difficult person behaves the way they do because they feel insecure, out of control, anxious or powerless. Exploding, yelling, not speaking and manipulating are some of the ways people have learned to deal with unpleasant feelings or situations.

   Ask yourself what might be motivating this person's behaviour. This can help clarify their needs and vulnerabilities. Although these people can be a challenge to deal with, they generally do have other redeeming qualities.

2. **Learn to cope with difficult styles.** Identify strategies that will change the nature of the interaction between the two of you. Some general strategies that might be used are:
   - Listening and acknowledging what the person is saying
   - Letting the person vent their frustration
   - Stating your opinions clearly
   - Focusing on problem-solving

   One way to learn about coping techniques is to observe others who have successful interactions with the individual. For example, you're uncomfortable and impatient with a co-worker because he explodes every time you ask him for assistance. Yet you see a colleague dealing effectively with the same person. By observing their interaction, you can identify and use the positive coping strategies that work for your colleague.

3. **Practice! Practice! Practice!** Once the coping strategy has been identified, the next step is to implement it. This requires both practicing the skill and choosing the right time to apply it. It may sound unnatural, but trying out different phrases and hearing yourself say them to the person will allow the behaviour to become more ingrained and automatic.
   For example, this might mean practicing saying, "Yes, I understand that this is another job you don't have time for, but the quicker we can get this project off our plates together, the better. What do you need from me to help you get this done?"

   This type of role-playing increases the likelihood of a successful outcome. This means testing your new strategy at every opportunity just so you can become better at responding. Choosing the right time to try out the skill is important. You'll want a situation that allows privacy and sufficient time to discuss the issue.

Gaining the courage to change

By taking a few minutes to assess the situation, coping strategies can be identified that will change the outcome of a conversation. You'll need courage and commitment to follow through with changing your reactions when dealing with a difficult person.

Remember that this change is about protecting your self-respect, your needs and your own sense of appropriateness, not about the difficult person. You've made the decision to do something about someone else's behaviour by changing yours. Whether they change or not is up to them.

If a conflict at work includes aspects of violence, aggression or harassment, it is important to get support and direction right away. It's not uncommon to feel unsure or reluctant to talk about issues of workplace violence,

but in the interest of your own and others' safety, it is critical that you do. Talk to your supervisor, the human resources department or a professional. The law protects you in this regard, and the only way to ensure our workplaces are safe is by speaking up when someone's action are inappropriate, threatening or dangerous.