

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

LESSONS FROM THE SECOND GRADE

By Bonnie Hagemann and Sandra Stroope


Every day, Sandra helps employees and leaders develop skills to resolve conflicts at a leading defense contractor where she works in talent management. So she was taken a little aback when colleague Bonnie began posting her second-grade son's conflict management toolbox on LinkedIn. What surprised Sandra most was that the second graders had similar tools to those used at the highest levels in the business world.

While research indicates that the ability to resolve conflict effectively is a skill that differentiates high-performing executives and top talent from average performers, how conflict is resolved effectively is less clear. Nonetheless, it is a skill, and it can be learned. Just as the second graders had to learn what tools they need to manage conflict, we need and use tools for conflict management every day in the workplace. Here's what we found in the second graders' conflict management toolbox. The fundamentals are the same, even at this early age.

Get help

Send out an S.O.S. In the grown-up world of work, life throws roadblocks and distractions in our way. Let's face it, there are those who will resist, oppose, avoid, compete, and make counter plans. Sometimes the best person to ask for help is the most opinionated and loudest source of opposition.

For example, on two different occasions Sandra was asked to implement a large-scale development initiative where it was made known that there was an influential leader who opposed. Both times, she met with the opposition up front to discuss the project goals before

A young girl with long dark hair in pigtails, wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and a dark skirt, is seen from behind, writing on a dark chalkboard. She is holding a piece of white chalk. A white speech bubble is drawn around the text on the board.

An 8-year-old's conflict management toolbox proves that managing conflict is not as sophisticated as you might think.



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implementation. She listened to their input, objections, and opinions on the timing and involvement of the employees in their organizations. When it came time to review the final plans for the go-ahead, to the surprise of others, both opinionated opponents stepped up, spoke out, and offered visible support. Why? Because Sandra took the time and had the patience to engage them in a meaningful way and ask for their help.

Compromise

Everyone gives up something to come to a quick solution. Perhaps you remember the China-U.S. Aircraft Collision. According to the CRS Report for Congress dated October 10, 2001, here is what happened:

“The serious incident of April 2001 between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) involved a collision over the South China Sea between a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) naval F-8 fighter. After surviving the near-fatal accident, the U.S. crew made an emergency landing ... the PRC detained 24 crew members for 11 days. Washington and Beijing disagreed over the cause of the accident, the release of the crew and plane, whether Washington would ‘apologize,’ and the PRC’s right to inspect the EP-3.”

When General Colin Powell relayed the incident, the beauty of compromise came to light. The Chinese government wanted an apology. The American government did not believe it had done anything wrong and, therefore, did not want to apologize. However, America did want the immediate release of the 24 crew members. Powell offered that while the U.S. government was not going to apologize, it would say it was sorry that it happened and sorry for the loss of the Chinese pilot. Chinese officials wanted more. Powell came up with, “We are very sorry.” This time they accepted. Public statements were made and the pilots were released.

Avoid

Put it off, sidestep, or act as though you do not know there is a problem. Avoiding as a way out ultimately can lead to problems worse than the initial issue if it festers.

However, when an issue is unimportant and not worth the time and energy of getting into a conflict, avoiding it skillfully can be extremely effective. Most of us have had the experience of receiving a gift from well-intended friend that makes us wonder, “What were they thinking?” This is a time to say “thank you” and sidestep gracefully.

There also are times when issues are deeply important to us, but the appropriate setting must be established before addressing it. When this happens, it’s better to avoid until you have the right time and place for a thorough discussion.

Talk it out

Have a heart-to-heart. This technique may sound like a tool suited to serious conversations between spouses, friends, or parents and children, but it can be quite effective in business situations as well. It is particularly useful for anyone in a service position that calls for preserving a client relationship. In fact, talking it out with the person with whom you have the conflict in a one-on-one nonthreatening discussion is one of the best first steps in conflict resolution.

Negotiate

Just like walking stairs, take it one step at a time. Negotiation is a great skill and is the topic of many books, legal courses, and development programs. One scenario where it is the best tactic is the discussion of salary and benefits.

It may be difficult to ask for more money, more time off, or better benefits, but if you don’t ask, you may never receive what might have been available. In fact, one good negotiation during a job interview can be equivalent to thousands

of dollars over the time. The same goes for settling a debt, finalizing a contract with a supplier, or vying for funding and resources among peers.

Chance

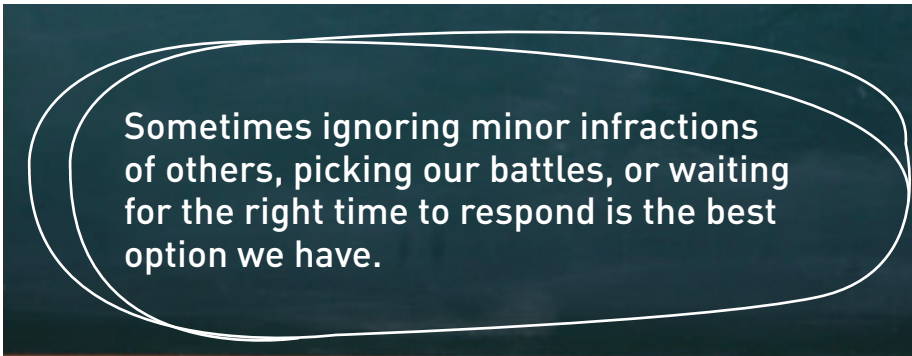
Draw straws or play rock, paper, scissors. You may think this is too elementary for the world of work, but it can actually be a light-hearted, fun way to get through otherwise cantankerous issues.

One such incident that created plenty of press happened back in 1992. At the time, Southwest Airlines and Stevens Aviation were both using the advertising tagline “Plane Smart.” Rather than go to lawsuits over it, Southwest CEO Herb Kelleher suggested an arm-wrestling match. Stevens agreed and won. However, the tactic generated so much good press for both that Stevens allowed Southwest Airlines to continue using the tagline after all.

Ignore

Put on your earmuffs and do something else. Sandra learned this tool while working with an executive who was known to lose his temper and become visibly angry when he disagreed with an idea. In their very first meeting, she saw the warning signs—his face turned red, a blue vein popped out across his forehead, he stood up, shook his head, and raised his voice to express his opinion. She waited for him to calm down and then offered another point of view with some additional information. He looked at her startled and said, “You know, you’re right!”

By ignoring his outburst, and not reacting out of anger or backing down in fear, she established immediate credibility in this situation. Future meetings went



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much more smoothly. We can't control the behavior of others, but we can control our reactions. Sometimes ignoring minor infractions of others, picking our battles, or waiting for the right time to respond is the best option we have.

Take turns

Let each person have his way for a while. Taking turns is great when you need to divvy up heavy lifting and make it easier on everyone. Sometimes taking turns is better than compromise because rather than giving up something, both parties get 100 percent for a period of time. Job sharing is an example. Each employee works 100 percent for designated time. A company called Planeshop in the Glasgow Airport is taking turns with "flexible retailing." It's a permanent store that "will be periodically taken over by a different brand" and is a patent-pending concept.

At EDA, consultants deliver executive coaching and leadership development to Global 1000 companies. Instead of one boss, consultants report to several clients and EDA. When there is a demanding client, EDA consultants will sometimes take turns behind the scenes. One week one consultant will do research or other offsite work, allowing the other to take a week off or focus on another client. By doing this, each client gets the best possible service and the consultants get to work as a team and avoid burnout. Taking turns is a collaborative approach and allows both sides to get what they need for a time.

Apologize

Accept responsibility and ask for forgiveness. In another incident, there was a recently promoted leader who had gotten off to a rocky start. Comments about how this young, inexperienced manager had made some bad decisions began to circulate. He admitted that he had come into his new position and made an important decision quickly without gathering all the information.

The most powerful turning point in the relationship between this leader and his team of union workers happened when he admitted, "I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I need you to work with me to help me make the best decisions for our region and our team." Accepting his apology,

they were able to move forward and work together with open communication.

Share

Both parties agree to share the same thing. Sharing and transparency are prevalent in the business world today. Such websites as Wikipedia, Google, and Facebook have a combined estimate of 221 million visitors per month, making information one of the easiest things to share.

Conflicts often arise over a lack of transparency. Employees become disgruntled over changing rules or work schedules when even a small amount of information would have increased buy-in. Many companies spend too much time and money protecting information that will not hurt and may even help to share openly.

Postpone

Wait until it's all clear and then go when it is safe. In her first home renovation experience, Sandra selected a contractor to paint the walls in her kitchen to give it a warm, sunny yellow glow. Upon selecting the perfect color, she gave the contractor a key that allowed him to paint while she was away. She returned and was shocked to find a color that resembled more of a brown mustard than the sun. She called to let him know there had been a mistake. To her dismay, he insisted that there was no mistake—and it was time to pay. Deadlocked in this difference, it was time to stop and take a time out.

Negotiation of the bill was postponed until corrections were made. In the heat of an argument, postponing, taking some time to calm down and think it through, and gathering more information or working out the details can make a huge difference.

Humor

Look at problems with a little humor. Humor is a powerful tool. It breaks up tension, opens minds to creativity, and makes work fun. On top of that, it is therapeutic and releases helpful endorphins into your immune system. We love a little play on words or something that makes our heads turn to figure it out. While humor can be used by anyone, it does help if you are mildly funny with a good delivery and timing. Of course, poorly

delivered humor can also turn out funny, though not as intended. Using humor in business can go a long way toward diffusing conflict.

Better results

Although conflict management may not be as sophisticated as we thought, that does not mean it is easy. We all have these tools available to us and we may have even known about them since the second grade, but managing conflict can still be difficult. People are busy, in a hurry, frustrated, passionate, anxious, tired, and unpredictable. So dealing with people is far from an exact science. We have tools for conflict management and communication, but knowing which tool to use when requires experience and wisdom.

There is plenty HR and learning professionals can do to make sure that their company's employees have the tools needed to manage and resolve conflict. They can give employees a safe place to practice by offering conflict management workshops, a peer coaching assignment, online courses, one-on-one coaching, and mentoring sessions with those who handle conflict well.

While conflict is rarely fun, engaging in it effectively can ultimately lead to a better overall result, increased creativity, and even new products and services—so learning this skill is essential. Ronald Reagan may have said it best when he stated, "Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means."

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