

Chapter 3: Managing Conflict with Your Boss

Overview

The special case of conflict between a direct report and a boss presents unique challenges. As a manager with responsibilities up and down the organizational chain, recognizing and resolving conflicts with your boss may well define to what degree you can effectively contribute to your organization. A conflict with your boss can arise from several different kinds of situations or opposing perspectives. Here are a few examples that illustrate potential roots of a conflict:

There is no role clarity or alignment. You are not sure about how your work supports your boss's work and how it meets the mission of the organization. You may think you're doing tasks that should be on your boss's list. Your boss may think that she or he is doing too much of your work.

The Look of Conflict

An executive agrees to take on a new position with greater scope and more responsibility. Initially the boss had promised that a pay increase would go with the new position, but that was delayed due to budget shortfalls. After a year the executive is becoming very frustrated and losing trust in her boss.

Unfilled expectations cause many of the conflicts between direct reports and their bosses. Communication — clear and often and open — is one key to managing and resolving those conflicts.

You and the boss sit at different vantage points. Depending on the structure of your organization, each of you is accountable to a different measure of performance and to different stakeholders. You and your boss may not pay attention to or respond to the same things because you don't hold the same position in the organization.

You lack confidence in your boss's ability. Several different situations could lead you to this perspective. Perhaps you held the interim position prior to your boss's appointment and then the organization asked you to orient your new boss to the job. Perhaps the skills your boss employs aren't as apparent to you as the skills you have to use to get results in your position.

Your boss lacks confidence in you. Your boss may be looking to you for information, advice, and options, but perceives you to be faltering on all fronts.

You and your boss are mismatched in ethics, values, and integrity. Managing conflict that threatens the organizational good because of mismatched ethics, values, or integrity may require you to seek advice and support from reliable internal HR resources or even external support sources (ranging from coaching to legal advice).

My View of Conflict: A Personal Worksheet

Take some time to consider the following list of questions. Answer them as completely and thoughtfully as you can. You may find it useful to record your answers so that you can return to them from time to time to see if your answers and your view toward conflict have shifted.

How do you define conflict?

How do you think your definition of conflict is similar to or different from how those around you define it?

What experiences shaped your views and attitudes about conflict?

What directions related to handling conflict were you given as a child?

How would you describe your communication strategies when you feel uncomfortable or uneasy? (Think of such actions as raising your voice, withdrawing, making wisecracks, laughing, asking questions, and bombarding others with information.)

What are the triggers that for you ignite a conflict?

What are your own attitudes toward conflict?

How do you behave toward your boss?

Are you engaging in any of the following behaviors?

- **Political maneuvering.** Don't go over your boss's head when conflict occurs. Include your boss when you go up the organizational ladder to address a problem. Don't start looking at your next position. Concentrate on the assignments your boss has given you.
- **Lip service.** All talk and no action is a sure way to increase conflict with your boss. Tell your boss what you'll do and then do it.
- **Loose talk.** Don't undermine your boss; it will come back to haunt you. Support your boss when dealing with peers, direct reports, and staff.
- **Apple-polishing.** Don't go overboard. Understanding and supporting your boss's point of view does not mean abandoning your own ideas or values. Nor should you withhold negative information. Determine when to raise issues in a public forum and when to take them behind closed doors.
- **Disagree disagreeably.** It's healthy to disagree, but don't carry the disagreement out of the meeting. Don't let it infect your relationships or prey on your mind.

You and your boss are mismatched in some other regard. This mismatch can run the gamut from management styles to differences in philosophy, motivation, and personality. You may prefer a more directive approach to leadership, for example. You may prefer more structure, and more direction about how to accomplish goals. Your boss may prefer a less directive approach

and give his direct reports more freedom to do their work than you are accustomed to or are comfortable with.

It's important to understand the circumstances under which conflicts between you and your boss can arise. Understanding the context allows you to make a full examination of the conflict so you can work toward a resolution. Before you can effectively manage a conflict with your boss, however, you will need to examine your own definition of conflict, your beliefs about conflict, and your behavior during a conflict situation. Your goal is to understand your responses to specific situations, or "triggers," and your reactions, or "coping strategies," to those situations. Once you understand more clearly how different situations can cause conflict, and how you interact with your boss when conflict arises, you will have a clearer view of your own contribution to a conflict situation.

The next step in learning to manage conflict with your boss is to investigate the expectations you and your boss have of each other. Your boss's expectations regarding performance and your own expectations regarding support and development can indicate a point of conflict. If you can clarify those expectations you will be ready to develop strategies for bridging the gap in your working relationship.

Clarifying Expectations

CCL has found that of all the factors important for success within an organization, there are four that your boss is likely to value most: resourcefulness, doing whatever it takes, being a quick study, and decisiveness. These four factors do the most to shape your boss's evaluation of your performance and to define your boss's expectations of your performance. If you are experiencing conflict with your boss, part of that conflict may stem from your failure to understand or meet your boss's expectations in one or more of these key areas.

Using the Performance Expectation Worksheet on pages 16–17, rate your performance related to each of the four factors CCL has found to be most influential in defining your boss's expectations and evaluations.

The Look of Conflict

The director of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for a large telecommunications company operated successfully with much autonomy and authority. This program was popular and the director enjoyed his "loose" relationship with his boss. However, a new boss was promoted to the supervisory position and conflict between that boss and the director began. The new boss, eager to make his mark on his new organization, informed the EAP director that he would no longer be in charge of the program. The new boss put himself in charge, changing the director's role to that of an implementer of the program. Following a series of discussions (some heated), both parties defined what they wanted and expected of each other. This clarification convinced the new boss to restore the original authority to the director.

I can take charge.

I need to develop this skill. This is one of my strengths.

I can learn from others when necessary.

I need to develop this skill. This is one of my strengths.

Being a quick study

I am able to master quickly new technical and business knowledge.

I need to develop this skill. This is one of my strengths.

Decisiveness

I can make good decisions under pressure.

I need to develop this skill. This is one of my strengths.

I can make decisions and take action in a timely fashion.

I need to develop this skill. This is one of my strengths.

I follow through on decisions.

I need to develop this skill. This is one of my strengths.

If your boss's evaluation doesn't agree with your opinion of yourself, conflict is likely to occur. But finding out what your boss expects of you and understanding his or her perspective isn't so easy. Bosses vary widely in their ability to communicate goals to their direct reports. Therefore, if you have not already, you should take steps to identify your boss's expectations, to review examples of how your boss will know when expectations are being met, and to seek direction for achieving those expectations. Here are a few strategies you can use to gather that kind of information:

Get feedback. Ask for formal and informal feedback through assessment instruments and face-to-face meetings. Use the four factors detailed in the Performance Expectation Worksheet as a reference point for understanding your boss's expectations.

Look around and across your organization. Who gets the resources in your organization? Who gets promoted? Who is rewarded in other ways? What are these individuals doing? What characteristics differentiate your performance from theirs?

Look up in your organization. What does your boss's boss expect? The answer says a lot about what is expected of you.

Uncover the history. Ask other people who report directly to your boss and people who previously reported to your boss what they think is or was expected of them. Review old memoranda and reflect on how projects were launched, carried out, and concluded.

The Look of Conflict

An executive in charge of a major initiative needs the support of his boss to execute the change. During their meetings, the boss asks many questions. From his perspective, the boss believes that by pushing back and playing the devil's advocate he is preparing his direct report for the resistance that's likely to accompany the changes to come. But because the boss wasn't explicit about his "coaching" tactics, the direct report interprets the behavior as unsupportive, even antagonistic — and contemplates resigning.

If you don't understand your boss's behavior in a given situation, give your boss feedback so that you can both be clear on the strategies and tactics being employed for business and developmental purposes.

Mapping Expectations

Think about a situation in which you felt that your boss did not communicate goals to you effectively but still held you accountable for meeting those goals. Describe the situation in the space provided (use a separate sheet of paper if you prefer, leaving ample room for a paragraph on the right side). Don't record information unless you have performed the action listed. If any of the actions are difficult for you to carry out (see page 18), that may indicate you have a developmental need in that area. Not only will you improve your ability to manage conflict by developing acumen in these communication and observation skills, but you will also add to your store of leadership competencies from which you can draw as you move forward in your career.

Situation	
Get Feedback	
Look Around	
Look Up and Down	
Uncover the History	

What does your information tell you? Based on what you've observed, learned, and recorded, can you make assumptions about what your boss expects of you? How do you think your boss viewed the situation? How did your boss respond to the situation? How do those assumptions compare to your assessment of your performance? Is there a gap? Might this gap be the root of your conflict? Has it caused conflict in the past? Might it cause conflict in the future? What factors might have influenced the conflict (both personal and organizational)?

In addition to performance-related expectations, your boss may also have expectations related to your style and approach. If you behave in ways that go against those expectations, conflict can result. Following are some common expectations that bosses have in regard to the behavior of their direct reports. How do you rate your behavior in these areas? Darken the circle that best matches your assessment.

Loyalty. Support your boss and your boss's agenda in public. Don't just go through the motions. Be part of the team. To what degree do you see yourself as showing loyalty?



Low Degree High Degree

Openness. Keep the communication channel open between you and your boss. Make honest requests. Disagree with vigor but respect. Speak without hidden motives. To what degree do you see yourself as showing openness?



Low Degree High Degree

Tolerance. Allow your boss to be human. Allow your boss to make mistakes and to be imperfect. Resist the temptation to cast your boss as the villain. To what degree do you think you see yourself as showing tolerance?



Low Degree High Degree

Focus. Keep on task. Work together, sharing common goals, marking progress toward mutually beneficial results. To what degree do you see yourself as showing focus?



Low Degree High Degree

Sharpening Your View

Once you understand your boss's expectations of your performance, you can begin to review how you see your boss. It's usually the case that individuals lean toward one of two common views

located at each extreme of a range of perspectives. Those extremes reflect what can be called a *low conflict* or a *high conflict* view. To grasp in which of these two camps your view falls, think objectively about your boss. Separate yourself as much as you can from any emotional ties related to your boss. Consider your boss only as a position, not as a person you may not like. How do you see that position relative to your own?

Low Conflict Extreme	High Conflict Extreme
You see your boss as having indisputable authority.	You see your boss's authority as illegitimate or undeserved.
You avoid and minimize conflict with your boss. You promise too much and cave in to unreasonable demands.	You are in a constant state of war with your boss. You interpret everything your boss does as a sign that he or she has no faith in your ability to do the job. Your boss seems so removed that you never know what is expected of you. Decisions that affect your work are made without your input.

To work effectively with your boss, you will need to move away from these extremes and work toward a middle ground. To help you accomplish that shift, make sure you understand what you seek from the relationship. Use the Boss Expectation Worksheet on pages 22–23 to help you define your view of a good boss.

Boss Expectation Worksheet

If you want to improve your relationship with your boss and handle conflicts in an effective and fruitful way, it's important for you to clarify what expectations you have of your boss's behavior. Use the spaces provided (or a blank sheet of paper) to record information about the leadership traits your boss displays in your work relationship. Using this information, engage your boss in a conversation regarding the expectations each of you has for the other.

<i>Providing Feedback</i>	
When was the last time your boss gave you feedback about your performance?	
How did you respond to that feedback?	
Was the feedback helpful to you in your development (even if the feedback was negative)?	
How frequently do you and your boss meet to discuss your performance?	
<i>Obtaining Necessary Resources</i>	
Do you have access to the resources you need to accomplish your goals and organizational initiatives? If not, why not?	
<i>Creating a Positive Environment</i>	
Do you feel comfortable discussing problems with your boss?	
If not, how could your boss create a more positive environment?	
<i>Supporting Your Development</i>	

<i>Supporting Your Development</i>	
What has your boss done in the last six months to support your professional development?	
What, if anything, do you want your boss to do differently to support your development, and in what developmental areas do you want that support?	

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by Davida Sharpe and Elinor Johnson

Center for Creative Leadership © 2002 (30 pages)

ISBN:1882197704