



EMIN News - Ask the Expert: Conflict Management

Our expert, Mark Wingfield of **MAX Conflict Management**, is online TODAY (10am-noon) to answer your queries about conflict management.



Send your questions to expert@emincubation.co.uk. Your questions & Mark's answers will be posted on this page so remember to refresh this page frequently to view updates.

Question:

"I am writing because we have a delicate situation at work: I am responsible for managing a designer who is set in his ways and has taken a dislike to a co-worker. Things came to a head recently when he found his co-worker looking through his files without his permission & thumped him. His co-worker, who is much younger than the designer and twice as big, chose not to respond & walked away. I wasn't there to witness the event but several colleagues did. The designer has since apologised to everybody in the office for his behaviour - although not directly to his co-worker as far as I know - & the atmosphere has calmed down.

The matter hasn't gone any further because nobody has put in a formal complaint & to be honest I'm fairly relieved as I don't want to have fire valuable staff. I am tempted to let sleeping dogs lie but I would like to know what course of action you think is appropriate."

Mark Wingfield replies:

On a minor matter it might be appropriate to ignore differences of opinion. However, physically assaulting a fellow colleague is an extremely serious matter.

If you know why the original dislike has arisen then you have a starting point. The underlying reasons for the thumping incident may well be traceable. I encourage you to speak to both individuals to get to the root of the problem.

It may be that the co-worker is also less than blameless. What was he doing in the files? Did he need the permission of the other to look at them? There might have been something very personal tucked away.

It might be appropriate to set up a revised company employee handbook (doesn't have to be complicated) which clearly identifies rights and responsibilities of staff, especially in respect to their fellow employees.

You or your company has a duty of care to your staff. In many organisations the one doing the thumping and possibly also the person who was thumped may have been suspended, disciplined or sacked for gross misconduct. I strongly urge you to review your position on behaviour at work with an employment professional in this field.

I'd be happy to put you in touch with specialists.

I hope this is useful, I would encourage you to make something positive out of this unsavoury incident by seizing it as an opportunity to help build the team and not to avoid it. By understanding the reasons for problems you have a better chance of setting a course to

stop them reoccurring.

Question:

"I started a business with a friend of mine a while ago & we now operate from a small office. However, we're cooped up in the office together & this can be a stressful environment.

My partner has plenty of good qualities but he also has problems in his personal life that affect his behaviour at work. He's irrational & irresponsible & this results into friction over work issues. We often fall out over work & we often end up arguing about non-work related issues like politics, religion, sport etc.

I frequently find myself wondering whether it's worth it. Should I grin & bear or just quit? What do you advise?"

Mark Wingfield replies:

Having had a similar experience in the past many years ago, I can empathise with much of your comment. I don't know your circumstances, but in my opinion life is too short to constantly argue and be unhappy doing what you're doing.

I used to think that a previous partner of mine was equally irrational but looking back now I realise that I was controlling the business and he wanted to have more of say - which I was open to - but he hadn't communicated this to me and I was blissfully ignorant of his frustration.

Now in any business relationships I find it useful to have clear guidelines as to who does what in the business, with the final say in some joint enterprise going to one or the other, depending on your skills, experience - or shareholding maybe!

Assuming your business is extremely important to you, you need to decide whether you want to work to resolve the issues, which

could be down to space, personality, strategic direction, your individual belief systems etc.

If you don't want to, then start your exit plan earlier rather than later.

I'd be happy to share some ideas and experience stories.

Question:

"I seem to be in long-term conflict with my manager. What are my options?"

Mark Wingfield replies:

The first question is whether you feel it is worth trying to resolve your differences at your place of work.

You may be well aware of some reasons for the conflict, but perhaps not all. An open and informal private discussion with your manager with questions like "How can we make our communication better" may break the ice and help understand the reasons for conflict. Conflict can be positive and useful.

Drill down a bit further with more specific questions about a particular project you have worked on together to try to understand the root cause of the conflict you are experiencing.

Make sure that you listen well to the responses, even if you don't agree with them. You can always respond later with a cool head. Make sure your body language says you are listening too!

It takes two to tango and make a relationship work - there may be personal issues or company restrictive issues at play or factors that you may not be aware of.

If you can't get progress you may wish to talk to anyone providing HR support in the organisation and see what your options are

from the company's point of view. Before doing this however, very carefully map out all the possible consequences of your actions and make sure you have thought through all the issues that you are aware of.

Discussion confidentially with a trusted colleague who knows both parties well can often help you in the preparation.

Ultimately you might have to decide to move on, which can be extremely difficult, but that's a personal decision for yourself and your circumstances.

Good luck and please contact me again if I can help further.

Question:

"There's someone in my company who is a very stropy individual. Although he's good at his job (production planning), he's consistently negative about work, colleagues, bosses, everything. Almost every major project that he's involved with results in him being in conflict with colleagues & ruffling feathers.

Obviously, I'm concerned about the impact on team morale. Can you recommend a specific approach for handling this type of person?"

Mark Wingfield replies:

Thank you for the question. I'm sure many recognise this situation in their own workplace.

Stropy is defined in the dictionary as bad tempered or deliberately awkward.

There will be reasons why your colleague is behaving the way he does.

The behaviour demonstrated is likely to be a consequence of frustration or anger elsewhere – which could be very private. The issues caused need to be raised by an appropriate

person if behaviour is severely affecting the team morale - the line manager has a responsibility to work with the individual to improve the situation for all.

Your colleague must be approached with respect. The issue should be raised with care. We all have our own skills and experiences and we all have our own preferred way of doing things. It could be that his way of working is at odds with how others would work. He could be in the wrong job for his personal preference, even though he does this one well. He could have been passed over for promotion, rightly or wrongly.

Ultimately, whatever comes out of your discussions an agreement needs to be reached on moving forward which provides a win win environment, I'd be happy to discuss the detail of this at your convenience.

It might be appropriate to undertake a profiling exercise on your staff, which would identify strengths, weaknesses and why people rub each other up the wrong way!

Once issues are in the open, get your colleagues to understand and respect each others' differences and strengths. A well conducted brainstorming or teambuilding exercise of some kind can be absolute dynamite here – in a positive way for moving a team forward.

Hope this helps, please contact me if I can help further.

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