



# EAP EMPLOYEE ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER

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# A BETTER WAY OF DEALING WITH CONFLICT

## Conflict Defined and Described

*Conflict* happens when two people disagree about something. Despite the fact that people have many similarities, everyone is different from everybody else, and people will have conflicts. Conflict is a natural part of life and happens often.

For example, if a driver coming the opposite way wants to turn the same way you do, that can cause conflict. Most of the time you agree almost instinctively on what each person needs to do. In another setting, suppose that your friend wants to play cards with you, but you want to go to a movie; or suppose that he or she wants to play golf and you want to go fishing—these situations can create conflict. How about choosing a place to spend the holidays? Shall you go to see your spouse's parents, your parents, or both sets of parents; stay at home; or go someplace else? Perhaps you choose to go to each place for a different holiday throughout the year. Most of the time people work it out.

Conflict can be positive and healthy, as well as a learning and growing experience. When people deal with it in a healthy way, they can generally find a solution that satisfies everyone. This is what is called managing conflict.

Unfortunately, conflict also has its negative side, where people not only disagree with each other, but sometimes also hurt feelings and fracture relationships. The purpose of this information is to show you that there are options for finding a better way to manage disagreements.

## Methods for Handling Conflict

Customarily, people handle conflict through *avoidance* or *position-based competition*. In the avoidance approach, people in conflict simply do not deal with their differences, for example, to keep peace in the family or in the office. This approach is useful if the differences are thought to be insignificant or if the people involved need time to "cool off." It may be nonproductive if the parties just let the conflict fester.

In the position-based competitive approach, people hold to their positions and try to prevail over the other person. This approach has two strains: *the power-based strain* and *the rights-based strain*.



In the power-based strain, people settle their differences according to who has more power. This is a legitimate and important way to handle conflict. For example, without a chain of command, a large organization or agency has no way to organize its efforts. Additionally, without good employees working efficiently to provide care and services, the organization cannot carry out its mission.

In the rights-based strain, the parties in a conflict refer to their legal rights as the basis for resolving their differences. If they cannot reach an agreement, they submit their claims to recognized authorities. The rights-based strain is also a legitimate and necessary way to handle conflicts. Where would people be without court systems and other grievance, complaint, and appeals procedures?

The problem with both strains of the competitive approach is that one person wins and one person loses. As a result, feelings may be hurt, relationships may be unnecessarily weakened or destroyed, and commitment to decisions may be



weak. There must be a better way to deal with conflict than this.

There is a better way! People can work together on conflict management to increase the understanding and practice of *interest-based problem solving*.

### Interest-Based Problem Solving

What interest-based problem solving (IBPS) means is that there are times when it makes sense for people who have a problem to sit down together to see if they can solve it by talking about their mutual concerns.

People who are in conflict with each other often have common interests. In the workplace, for example, common interests include the overall success of the organization, communication, teamwork, professional competence for everyone, quality, productivity, ethical treatment, and recognition of diversity.

IBPS has some significant advantages over the avoidance and competitive approaches:

1. The parties will be more likely to feel that the decision-making process has been a fair one.
2. The parties will tend to be more committed to carrying out the agreements made.
3. They are likely to have a greater understanding of, and respect for, each other.
4. If future conflicts arise, they will have an example to follow, making it easier for the parties to address the conflict and deal with it constructively.
5. IBPS often costs less in the long run than power- or rights-based strains. IBPS produces results and consistently maintains relationships between the parties. It may even improve the relationship.

That is not to say that all conflicts should be handled the same way. Some differences just are not that big a deal. Others may be caused inadvertently, and there is just not much that can be done about them. There will always be a legitimate need for avoidance and competition as solutions to conflict situations.

On the other hand, some disputes are big, important, and tough enough that it makes sense to address them directly. It is important to realise in such situations that you have not two, but three choices in how to do this: avoidance, competition, and analyzing interests.



### Recap on How to Deal with Conflict

There are three primary strategies used to deal with conflict:

- **Flight**—Avoiding conflict and hoping that it will go away (avoidance)
- **Fight**—Using authority, rights, or force to attempt to prevail over others (position-based competition)
- **Unite**—Talking with other people to develop solutions that will satisfy mutual interests, and come to some result with which they all can live (IBPS)

Experience shows that people will be more successful in accomplishing their missions using various conflict management techniques. By improving how people deal with conflict, people can change the culture of their organization (or other setting) to remove some of the barriers in reaching their objectives.

If you treat people well and fairly, most of the time they will respond the same way. Also, if you treat each other honestly and fairly, you will create a friendlier working environment. Ordinarily, that can increase quality-driven productivity.

# MONITORING YOUR ENERGY TO BE THE BEST AT WORK

Work demands can drain your energy at times. You need to deal with work pressure, face change with an open mind, and be a supportive member of your team. You can only do all of that if you attend to your own physical and emotional needs. Here are some suggestions for monitoring your energy so that you can be your best at work.

## The Three Types of Energy

- **Physical energy** activates the body's movements and actions. The amount of physical energy is dictated by one's health, diet, and physical activity.
- **Mental energy** activates the brain to perform cognitive functions. The brain, while only accounting for 2 percent of the body's mass, demands 20 percent of the body's total energy budget. Mental energy is required for decision-making, analyzing, focus, and problem-solving.
- **Emotional energy** is what fuels human emotions. Emotions can be categorized as high energy or low energy. Not only do high-energy, negative emotions affect energy resources, but positive, high-energy emotions, like excitement and elation, do as well.



## Energy Gains and Drains

The key to managing your energy is identifying your energy gains and drains. Energy gains are those activities that you do for yourself that recharge your batteries. The interesting thing is that not everyone shares the same energy gains and drains. For example, socializing may boost your energy level, but completely diminish someone else's.

Examples of potential energy-gaining activities include:

- Spending time with a friend
- Working on a hobby
- Being in nature
- Exercising
- Meditating

Energy drains are the opposite of energy gains. It's those activities that require a high amount of mental or emotional energy. Some examples of potential energy-draining activities include:

- Dealing with conflict
- A difficult commute
- Working with a difficult person
- Completing projects at the last minute
- Responding to other people's emotions

Once you identify those actions that give you an energy boost, prioritize some of them as part of your weekly routine. Often, when people get busy or overwhelmed, they start canceling things they consider low priority. However, activities that restore energy levels should not be considered low priority. If you want to be at your best, they are essential.

## Ways to Recharge Your Energy

- **Attend to your health.** Exercise regularly. Eat a healthy diet. Get the sleep you need.
- **Pay attention to your emotions.** Recognize the physical signs of stress before they reveal themselves in unhelpful behavior. Know the triggers that provoke you to anger or withdrawal. Don't allow yourself to become stuck in anger or negative rumination. Instead, practice positive reframing, looking for opportunities in obstacles and setbacks.
- **Take breaks to recharge.** Take short breaks during the workday to pause and relax, and breaks before or after work to calm yourself. Listen to soothing music. Meditate or use breathing techniques. Take a walk or go to the gym to release energy and regain focus.
- **Use your vacation time to get away from work and recharge.**
- **Make time for the people and activities you care about outside of work.** Carve out both "me" and "we" time—time by yourself to recharge, and time with friends and family to connect and share.
- **Practice mindfulness.** Mindfulness is a powerful tool to help restore energy and manage stress. Check with your employee support program to get more information about mindfulness.
- **Reach out to your manager when you are feeling overwhelmed.** Talk with your manager when your list of priorities gets overwhelming. Together, figure out which are most critical, which can wait, and whether there's another way to get them done.
- **Cultivate friendships at work** with energizing and uplifting colleagues and with people you can be yourself with. In a good relationship, providing and accepting support is energizing, not draining. Good friends can make you laugh and see the bright side of a challenging situation.
- **Seek variety and learning opportunities in your work.** Variety is energizing. Try new ways of doing your work. Talk with your manager about options to learn new skills and take on new tasks.

*This was adapted from the article "Leaders: Managing Your Energy Level" and from the chapter "Monitoring Your Energy to Manage" (pp. 9–10) in A Manager's Guide to the Employee Support Program.*

*Source: Morgan, H. (2021, November). Monitoring your energy to be your best at work. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.*



## FLOW: TIME TO REZONE

### What is flow?

Have you ever been so absorbed by an activity that you lost all sense of time? Were you ever so focused on your task at hand that all your worries drifted away? If so, you may have been in a mental state psychologists refer to as flow.

According to psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, people enter a state of flow when they're completely immersed in an activity of interest. A guitarist playing over a piece of music, or a costume designer transferring their ideas from pen to paper, may reach this state of flow. In an interview for *Wired* magazine, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi stated, "The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."<sup>1</sup>

## Characteristics of Flow

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi proposed 10 factors that are characteristic of flow. He suggested that most of these factors would be present when an individual enters their state of flow. Such characteristics included the following:

- The activity is intrinsically rewarding.
- In completing the activity, the individual is working towards well-defined, challenging, and attainable goals.
- The individual is attentive solely to the activity of interest.
- The individual feels a strong sense of control over the activity of interest and the outcomes.
- The individual's concept of self falls away when engaged in the activity.
- In completing the activity, the individual is mindful of the quality of their input.
- The individual loses awareness of their physiological needs (e.g. sleep).
- There is a balance between the individual's skill level and the challenge of the task.
- The individual is hyper focused on the task at hand.
- The individual loses track of time.

Ultimately, the activity of interest must be sufficiently challenging but accomplishable in order for people to enter a state of flow. When you are lying in bed, scrolling through Facebook and Instagram, you are not in this state of flow. Such an activity requires no challenge and little skill to be undertaken.

## Benefits of Flow

The benefits of flow are numerous and well documented. Research suggests that when engaged in a state of flow, your brain releases a chemical messenger called dopamine. When dopamine is released, you feel pleasure. Since the feeling of pleasure is inherently reinforcing, the state of flow is inherently reinforcing. Over time, you become motivated to seek out that state of flow; to do this, you return to your activities of interest. Returning to this state of flow allows you to master your activity. Think of a painter returning to their canvas every weekend and developing their artistic abilities.

## What is the connection between flow and wellbeing?

There are also many health benefits of flow. When you are in a state of flow, there is no time to experience sadness and worry. As such, flow promotes emotional regulation. Flow teaches people that engagement in their activities of interest can help them cope. Practicing an instrument, editing a photograph, or writing a novel then becomes a powerful coping tool. Since flow promotes mastery through engagement, flow can also be used to build your confidence and self-esteem. When you reflect on how far you've come in your activities of interest, you acknowledge the value of your efforts and therefore yourself. Flow encourages people to take on new challenges as they feel they have the confidence to do so.

## How do you increase your chances of achieving flow?

In reaching flow, it is helpful to use the principles of SMART goals. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-oriented. For example, if you want to learn how to play the drums, you assign yourself the goal of practising drums for half an hour, this upcoming Saturday, in your bedroom between 2:00 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. It is also helpful to eliminate distractions or objects that may compete for your attention. For example, when learning how to play the drums, leave your mobile phone and laptop in another room, and check the devices only when you have completed your SMART goal.

Finally, as your skill level increases, so should the challenging nature of your SMART goals. It's important, however, that you increase the level of challenge gradually. If you push yourself too much too soon, you risk misalignment between the activity and your skill level. This may result in frustration and disrupt your state of flow.

## Reference

1. Geirland, J. (1996, September 1). Go with the flow. *Wired*. Retrieved February 12, 2024, from <https://www.wired.com/1996/09/czik>