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Resolving Conflict

Tensions are inevitable in newsrooms. Mix deadline pressure with creative, skeptical people and there's bound to be some conflict. News managers need to be able to recognize conflict and resolve it before it causes more serious problems. How you handle conflict can be important to your success as a leader.

"Adrenaline is high, emotions are high, but it's a myth that it's the norm for people to stand toe to toe in the newsroom and scream the F word at each other," says former news director Marci Burdick. "None of this has a positive impact on getting the job done."

Burdick, now senior VP of broadcasting and

cable for Schurz Communications, says news managers need to intervene quickly when conflict arises. That's much more easily said than done, of course. Most people instinctively avoid confrontation; it's unpleasant. But so is the stress level

in conflict-ridden newsrooms. Mark Miller, news director of WBAL-AM in Baltimore, agrees. "If you let them go on too long they become a cancer on the team spirit of the newsroom," he says.

Jill Geisler, who teaches leadership seminars at The Poynter Institute, says the most valuable thing she learned in a graduate study of conflict resolution was a simple definition she shares with news man-

OVERCOME CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

Lack of time?
Schedule it.

Lack of information?
Investigate.

Fear of failure?
Prepare and practice.

Sense of futility?
Create an action plan.



“I wish I had been more decisive about resolving conflict. I let it go on longer than I should have.”

LEE GILES, 35-YEAR NEWS DIRECTOR, WISH-TV, INDIANAPOLIS

agers: “Conflict is my perception that you are interfering with my goals.”

The perceptions may be grounded in fact, but that doesn’t help resolve the conflict. As a news director, Kevin Benz of News 8 Austin says he had to learn a basic truth: “I can’t change attitudes. I can change the behavior that’s causing the problem. My ‘Aha!’ moment was when I realized it was about changing behavior for the benefit of the rest of the newsroom.”

The first step in conflict resolution is understanding what really happened. Investigate the situation as you would a news story. Go in with an open mind, and check with everyone involved. Make it clear that the goal is not to find someone to blame but to learn how to avoid the conflict in the future. “Clear the air,” says Paul Lewis, news director at WTIC-TV in Hartford, CT. “Don’t let things fester.”

Geisler encourages leaders to help people achieve their goals while also preserving their relationships, something known as a win-win approach. She identifies five main styles of conflict resolution, all of which involve a balancing act between our goals and our relationships. She says most people have a favored, or “default,” style but need to learn when each style works best:

- **Control/Competition** I value my goal over our relationship. I will “win.” You will “lose.”: This style works when the goal is critical and the relationship isn’t. Controllers often see too many situations

as “critical” and miss opportunities to build relationships.

- **Collaboration** I work with you so we can both reach our goals and build our relationship. This approach may take more time and creativity but is a key leadership skill.
- **Promise** Both sides make concessions or trade-offs based on an appeal to fairness. This approach can provide a quick, short-term solution and is a good fallback position but shouldn’t be your consistent first choice when collaboration is possible.
- **Accommodation** I give up my goal to preserve our relationship. This is not a bad approach if my goal is relatively unimportant but the relationship is very important. (We often accommodate our bosses.) Used too often, however, it can mean we have abandoned our goals.
- **Avoidance** I give up my goal *and* our relationship. This approach should be a last resort, used when the other person is potentially dangerous, but it can help bullies thrive and conflicts fester.

When two people were in conflict at her station, Burdick says, she would bring each one into her office, shut the door, and ask for their side of the story. “I asked a lot of questions, even if I knew the answers,” she says. “Be clear about what’s not acceptable,” she advises, and if it’s a power struggle, “be clear [about] whom you expect to make the decision.” To give the

HANDLEING PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Make expectations clear

Apply standards fairly

Provide help and guidance

Give regular feedback
Explain consequences



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participants a chance to create their own solution to the problem, Burdick would meet with them together and ask how they would handle things differently should the situation arise again.

If the same bad behavior recurs, a forceful warning is in order, along with a written note in the file. "If pointing out a problem and coaching doesn't fix it, then you go into defensive management mode and start documenting," says Lewis. "Put them on a plan with specific goals. Here's what you are doing. Here's what you need to do. Here's when you need to do it. Here's when we'll meet again." Lewis says he often quotes the employee's job description back to them when describing his expectations. He also lets the employee know that he promises to help them meet their objectives.

When problems need to be addressed more than once, it's a good idea to keep your boss in the loop so he or she can back you up and to get advice from human resources. It may also be wise to include a third person in the meeting, to witness and document the conversation.

Difficult Conversations

It's hard to confront problem employees, so these kinds of conversations require planning. "Know going in how tough the conversation will be," says

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

Investigate ahead of time

Anticipate how the other person will respond

Meet privately and allow no interruptions

Avoid emotional reactions

Keep the conversation to that one issue

Ask for a commitment to a solution

Nexstar vice president and corporate news director Susana Schuler. "Pause and reflect. Deal with the situation when you are not in crisis mode." Don't delay too long, however. The longer you wait to have a difficult conversation, the more likely it is that something will blow up or melt down.

Preparation means covering all the bases:

■ **Time** Get it done as soon as possible. Avoid Fridays so you can follow up immediately if necessary and so the employee doesn't stew for two days.

- **Place** Choose a private, quiet location to avoid interruptions.
- **Facts** Investigate before coming to any conclusions, and don't make decisions until you hear all sides.
- **Emotions** Plan to keep your own emotions under control. Anticipate resistance and emotional responses and prepare for how you will handle them.
- **Language** Watch your words—don't nag, condemn or belittle. Rehearse or outline the conversation in advance.
- **Outcome** Know what you want to accomplish, and have solutions ready to present.

WTSP-TV news director Lane Michaelsen agrees that it's important to schedule the conversation in advance so you have time to pre-



"Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate and doubt to offer a solution everybody can understand."

COLIN POWELL

pare. “I practice conversations all the time, even in the car on the way to work,” Michaelsen says. “I figure out what they might say and plan my response. I might have five scripts based on different answers. I try to make it so there are no surprises. I know what road I’m going down.”

Knowing the outcome you want helps you design a way to get there, and planning helps keep emotion out of the discussion. “Never design the conversation for the manager to feel better for having unloaded on the employee,” says Burdick. Follow these guidelines during difficult conversations with employees:

- **Focus on the work** Don’t attack who they are; discuss what they do. Emphasize your mutual goal: changed behavior, for the good of the entire newsroom.
- **Listen carefully** Ask open-ended, non judgmental questions. Ask how and what instead of why. Watch body language for nonverbal clues.
- **Seek understanding** Be prepared to change your mind. Restate what the employee says to be sure you have a clear picture. Take notes.
- **Stay on message** Don’t bring up and don’t allow the employee to bring up unrelated issues.
- **Find solutions** Let the employee propose solutions and develop an action plan and a timetable for changed behavior.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
Be prepared
Be honest
Be direct
Be specific
Be compassionate

Following up means more than another meeting. Benz advises making notes about the conversation and keeping a copy in your files. Look for opportunities to reinforce the results of the meeting—recognize and praise good behavior and act immediately if the bad behavior resurfaces. Benz also suggests paying close attention to your interactions with the employee. “You must be the role model for how your relationship will continue,” he says.

Not all difficult conversations go smoothly. It’s important to know when to get out. If the meeting is getting out of control, it is better to continue at a later time.

GOOD QUESTIONS FOR TOUGH CONVERSATIONS
What is the real cause of the problem?
What do you think about that?
What is the solution you are proposing?
Have you discussed this with colleagues?
What do you need from me?

- **Be firm** Once you agree on a plan, the discussion is over. Make sure the employee understands the consequences of failing to abide by the plan.
- **Follow up** Schedule a time to meet again within 30 days to review progress on the action plan.

Firing Miller of WBAL-AM cautions that sometimes the conflict just cannot be resolved. “People admit they’re not in a good marriage every day, but it’s hard to admit when you’re not in a good working relationship.”

Such an admission is difficult, not just for the employee but also for the manager. Having to let someone go for any reason other than budget cuts represents failure, says Poynter’s Geisler, “either a failure of



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managers to hire and train well, a failure of staff to perform to standards, or both.” If you must fire someone, keep these things in mind:

- **Respect the person’s dignity** Meet privately, and don’t send them out of the meeting into a room full of people.

- **Be direct** Explain the purpose of the conversation right from the start. Don’t belabor the point or harp on past performance issues.
- **Stay calm** Do not be defensive or emotional, even in response to personal attacks.
- **Be prepared** Provide details about the separation plan, including any financial compensation or continuation of benefits, or have human resources on standby to do so.



“Employees who bully other employees is one of the issues in my newsroom that causes me the most stress.”

NEWS DIRECTOR AT RTNDF BRAINSTORMING SESSION