

# McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

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## Hatfields and McCoys: Managing Conflict with Insight

Chances are you have dealt with conflict in your workplace at least once in the past three months. (And if you've only had one major fracas to contend with; then congratulations, you're one of the blessed.) For the rest of us, departmental, managerial and person-to-person conflicts are going to occur on a regular basis. And while most disagreements don't escalate into full fledged mountain warfare, workplace conflicts take their toll on productivity, office morale and management resources every year. It's an unavoidable fact: if your company employs people, your company will have conflict. Big or small, in- your-face or from behind the door, conflict impacts the working environment. Avoiding the disagreements that lead to conflict may not always be within our control; how we choose to *deal* with conflict certainly is.

There's usually an identifiable place in time when office conflict takes off and begins a life of its own. Typically it's when people who aren't personally involved in the conflict become aware of the situation and actively begin to *discuss it*. Now we've got the original conflict as well as the perceived conflict in the "public domain." That's drama in River City, Mister.

Rule Number One: Choose to deal. Approach the individuals involved in the conflict separately. Allow them sufficient time to clearly explain the stress they're experiencing and why they think it is happening. (This is the time to let someone vent if they need to.) Once each party has had time to clearly state their concerns in private, it is now time for all parties involved to sit down and work on a resolution.

Ignoring workplace conflict rarely produces the results we hope for. When we ignore conflict and tiptoe around it like a sleeping giant we don't want to wake, we give it more power than it deserves. Better to confront disagreements early on, before they begin to play out in rumor, speculation and casual observation. *When it comes to conflict in your community at work, looking the other way is not advisable.*

Best practice methods advise actively managing workplace conflict by:

- Assisting in acknowledging and identifying the conflict between the involved parties.
- Helping individuals to stick to the issue at hand; no recitation of past crimes allowed.
- Providing for containment of the conflict with upfront agreements of confidentiality.
- Facilitating mediation with open discussions toward the goal of resolution.
- Communicating that resolution is not an option, but rather a business necessity.

While we're busy working all that out, is there a way to mitigate the factors that always seem to lead to conflict in the first place? Is there a path we can follow back to the point where polite lunch room repartee takes a turn down the darkened road of miscommunication and resentment?

Yes! It happens the minute we see the other person begin to behave in ways we don't understand. What are they doing? They can't be serious. Look at that! We always had a feeling they weren't just like us, and now they've gone and PROVED IT!

Understanding that there are inherent differences in people and how they prefer to function in the world is key.

- Gaining knowledge of the personalities we work with is a fundamental step toward improving communication and collaboration in the workplace.
- Working to recognize our own behavioral patterns will help us to better manage ourselves.

There are many resources available that can assist us in better understanding ourselves and our coworkers *before* conflicts arise; personality instruments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, DISC profiling, Leadership Assessments, and 360° Degree Feedback are some of the assessments that are highly effective and widely used in businesses today.

Learning more about how and why people behave the way they do is becoming very relevant to how we link our personnel and intellectual capital to our business goals. Conflict resolution will always be important. Mitigating conflict through a better understanding of our work teams and co-workers is the new baseline that puts us miles ahead in optimizing our workforce.

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McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Melissa McDaniel at 301-662-2400 or via email: [melissa@mksh.com](mailto:melissa@mksh.com).

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