

# Municipal Advocate

The Massachusetts Municipal Association

- Customer Service
- Managing Conflict
- Building Teams
- Reducing Stress

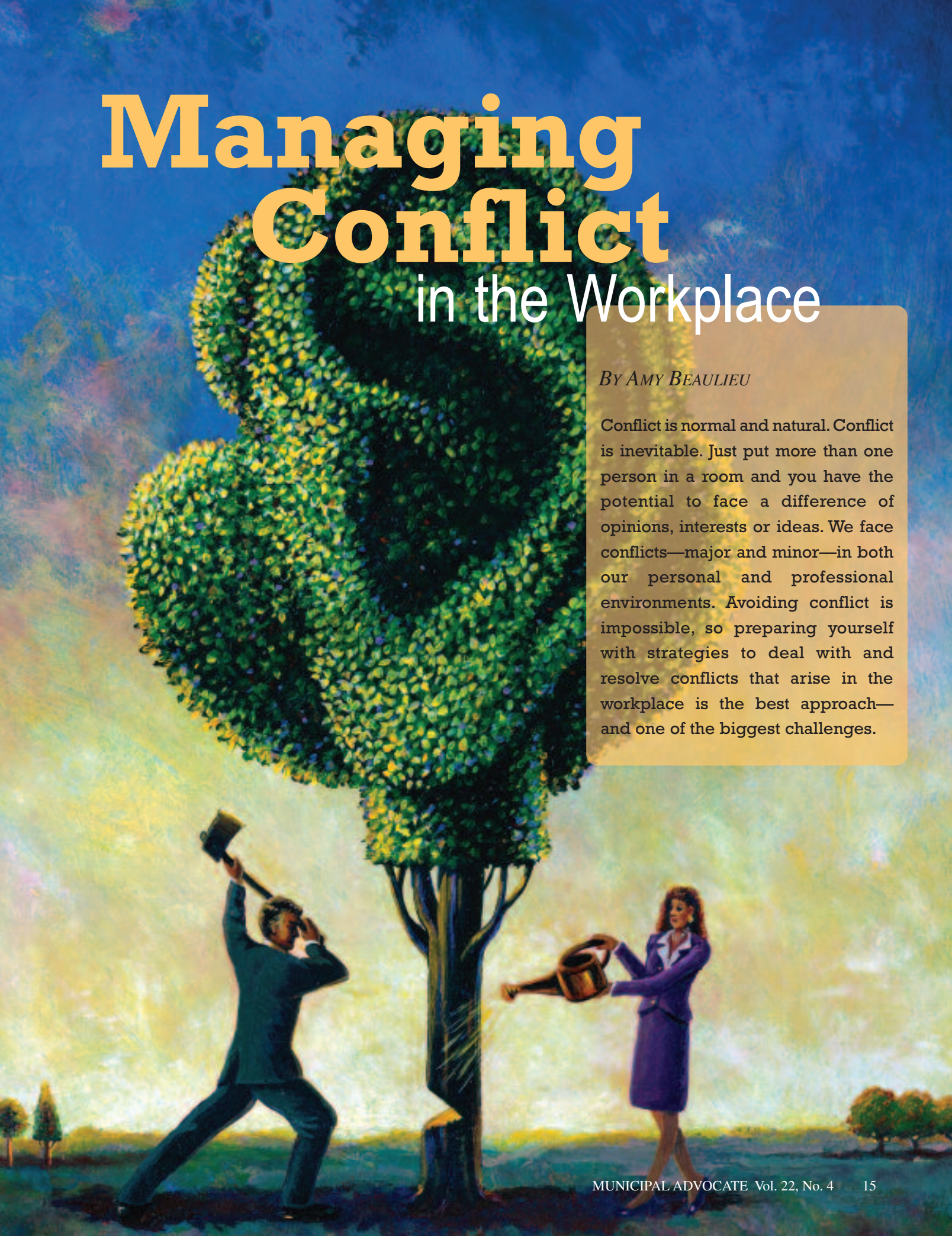
## PERSONNEL Management



# Managing Conflict in the Workplace

*By AMY BEAULIEU*

Conflict is normal and natural. Conflict is inevitable. Just put more than one person in a room and you have the potential to face a difference of opinions, interests or ideas. We face conflicts—major and minor—in both our personal and professional environments. Avoiding conflict is impossible, so preparing yourself with strategies to deal with and resolve conflicts that arise in the workplace is the best approach—and one of the biggest challenges.





Causes of workplace conflict are many: moods, personalities, settings, learned patterns or habits, values, interpersonal relationships, or any issue at hand. Besides the demands of personal lives that take a toll on our workplace performance, there can also be underlying work conditions that are added to this recipe for trouble. Work conditions may include increasing demands for accountability, strict outcome measures, funding restraints, decreased staffing and increased responsibilities for the remaining staff, deadlines, cramped office spaces, and inadequate resources to name a few. If we accept conflict as a normal part of human interactions, learning effective ways to navigate our way through those difficult moments in order to grow and learn from each experience is in our best interest.

Regardless of the cause, recognizing the symptoms is an important first step in trying to resolve a problem. Clashes in the workplace are not always obvious and may show up looking a lot like burnout. Consider these symptoms as possible indicators of unresolved conflicts:

- Negative attitudes: Refusal to cooperate on tasks with others. “I can’t work with that person/department.”
- Frequent disagreements: Communication deteriorates. Gossip, backstabbing and pointing fingers happen. Confusion about roles and responsibilities leads to competition. Work gets sabotaged and deadlines are missed.
- High stress: Stress on departments typically waxes and wanes according to the work responsibilities. If employees are consistently “stressed out” for no apparent operational reasons, interpersonal conflicts may be the cause. Productivity and efficiency tend to decrease as people focus on their distress rather than their work.
- Low morale: People feel they are not, or their work is not, respected or valued. They are reluctant to work on committees and new projects. There is no loyalty to the employer. Misuse of work time increases, as does staff turnover.

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- Frequent absences: People don’t like coming to work. Use of sick, vacation and personal time increases.
- Unsafe feelings: Trust is broken. Employee behaviors become unpredictable and may potentially become violent.

Regardless of the cause of the conflict, using a negotiation strategy to address the tension will help prevent further damage to the office environment. Whether you’re involved in the conflict or you’re the manager of the department where the conflict occurs, your best option is to intervene effectively.

### Fight or Flight?

How we choose to address or respond to disagreements stems from the conflict negotiation methods we learned from our role models. Which method did you learn, “fight” or “flight”? The fight perspective is, “I’m right. You’re wrong.” The flight perspective is, “You’re right, I’m wrong.” During a conflict, did you see your caregivers yell or become physically dangerous? Or did you see them walk out or stew in silence? Or did you see them share their differing opinions, then talk until a satisfactory solution was agreed upon? Whatever lessons we learned will affect how we approach conflicts as an adult both in the workplace and at home.

Whether your style is aggressive (fight) or passive (flight), the best strategy is in between: assertive. Take a few moments to think about your typical style. Do you shy away, bite your tongue, complain to others, or dwell on the upset? Do you confront people right away? Do you yell and use intimidation, insults, or blaming statements? Do you talk to be understood and listen to understand?

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument identifies five basic approaches to dealing with interpersonal conflicts (see box, below). What determines your approach will depend on the significance of the person you’re dealing with and the importance of the issue at hand. There is not one correct way to intervene; the key is to choose the style most effective with that particular situation.

**Avoidance:** “Choose your battles wisely” is good advice, but if your tendency is to be passive and avoid confronting problems, it’s a good idea to consider the consequences. First ask yourself, will avoiding this cause future problems? Is the problem likely to continue? Will these feelings fester and cause resentment to grow or deepen? If the answers are no, then perhaps the issue at stake is insignificant and avoidance may be a wise option. If the answer to any of these questions is yes, however, then avoidance is not the best option. It would be wise to choose another, more effective approach.

**Accommodation:** Another passive approach to handling conflict, accommodation is used when you care more about the other party than the issue at hand. You may choose to accommodate the other person’s position simply because the issue on the table isn’t all that important to you. In other words, you are more interested in the morale of the person than “winning” the issue. Think of the employee you ask to complete a report. Is it more important to have the report written in the exact manner you imagine, or is it more important that the employee achieves the task of writing it? In the case of having work-style differences, accommodation may benefit the workplace for both of you.

Approaches to Dealing With Conflicts	
Style	Techniques Used
Avoidance	Denial, ignoring, withdrawing
Accommodation	Agreement, appeasement, flattery
Competition	Controlling, outwitting, coercing, fighting
Compromise	Bargaining, reducing expectations, splitting the difference
Collaboration	Gathering information, accepting discussion/disagreement, looking for options

*Source: Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*

**Competition:** Consider the role of a fire department lieutenant. During a fire, he cannot manage such a situation effectively by choosing the avoidance approach; the fire (issue) will continue burning, endangering lives and property. An alternative approach—competition—would be a better intervention in a situation where quick or unpopular decisions need to be made, as in a crisis. The decision to use competition is based on resolving the issue for the good of the whole, rather than on the relationship with those involved.

**Compromise:** An effective yet time-consuming approach, compromise is useful for handling conflicts when both parties are agreeable to come to the table. The challenge is that each person must be willing to give up something in order to gain something. For example, it might be effective to use this approach with an employee who is asking to schedule vacation time during a particularly busy week when a project deadline has to be met. Perhaps the employee could stay late prior to the vacation so that the project can be completed on time in his or her absence. In return, the employer could honor the “flex” time accumulated so the employee doesn’t have to use as much vacation time. Coming to a compromise is generally time-consuming due to the fact that both parties allow the other to share their needs, thoughts and opinions on the issue before coming to the solution.

**Collaboration:** Considered to be the win-win approach to handling conflicts, collaboration requires the use of effective communication skills to resolve conflicts. The investment of time to collaborate on a feasible solution can pay off with fewer misunderstandings and disagreements later on. Collaboration is considered negotiating conflict. We negotiate, or work to resolve, conflicts when both the person and the issue are important.

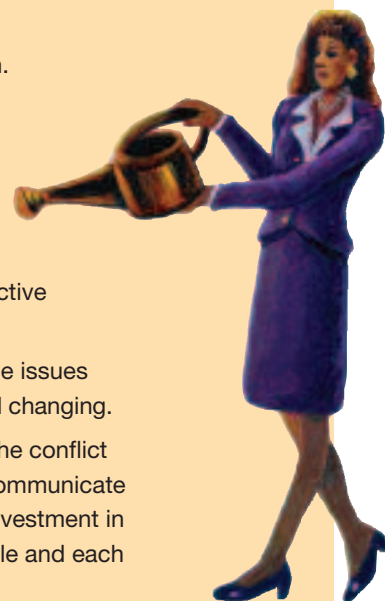
### Making Collaboration Work

So how do you make collaboration work? Consider the case of Allen, a thirteen-year public works employee who had been called into his supervisor’s office several times in the weeks following the implementation of a new procedure. His supervisor was dissatisfied with the way Allen was completing the forms associated

### Tips for Resolving Conflicts

- Choose the best intervention for each situation.
- Prepare yourself for the conversation as much as possible; reflect on the main cause(s) of the conflict. Accept that there will be differing perceptions of the issue(s).
- Address the issues in-person. Voicemails, notes, e-mails, faxes, or memos are not productive ways to resolve differences.
- Separate the issue from the person. Stick to the issues by focusing on the specific behaviors that need changing.
- Clearly state your intentions of why you want the conflict resolved; identify the benefits to each party. Communicate how you want the conflict resolved and your investment in the outcome. Only offer options that are feasible and each party can commit to.
- Take a “timeout” if the conversation becomes heated. Uncontrolled emotions will interfere with coming to a satisfactory resolution. Agree to come back at another set time to continue the discussion.

— Amy Beaulieu



with the new procedure. At first Allen was told he was taking too long to fill out the new forms. Then he was told he wasn’t including enough detail. Allen was frustrated and sought help. He felt he could not please his boss even though he wanted to—and did not want to jeopardize his long-standing position.

Allen and his supervisor needed to agree on the desired solution in order to have the full investment of each party. One way Allen and his supervisor could collaborate would be for the supervisor to offer Allen additional training on the documentation process. The supervisor could clearly spell out his expectations by showing Allen examples of forms that were properly filled out and establishing a timeframe in which to complete the forms. This collaboration could benefit both parties by alleviating the frustration around this new procedure.

Intangible interests can affect our best negotiation—or collaboration—efforts. People have inherent needs: respect, fair treatment, maintaining their integrity and dignity, feeling appreciated and valued.

These are the values that lie beneath our positions. In Allen’s case, he wanted to be appreciated for the efforts he had put in for thirteen years and needed patience from the supervisor while he learned the new way of doing business. More important, he needed a way to safely approach the supervisor to seek additional training without feeling humiliated.

Practicing stress reduction skills and anger management techniques, and thinking positively, will reduce the frequency of conflicts and enhance one’s resiliency for dealing with the inherent stress that comes from working with others. Doing so will allow you to bounce back from those moments when individuals unintentionally step on your toes. Developing your understanding of how conflicts arise, and practicing ways to handle conflicts in an assertive way, can make conflicts far less destructive. They will become an aspect of work you can manage, rather than having them manage you. Being assertive requires effort and practice. But actively resolving conflict when it occurs creates a more positive work environment for everyone. ✨