FREE KIT · MANAGERS

Resolving a conflict in your team

Understand first. Resolve second.
The questions, phrases and ground rules to take action, without taking sides.

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The rule of this kit: never treat a problem you don't understand.

Every step starts with understanding. The number-one goal of your meetings isn't to resolve. It's to understand.

1. Your role as a manager

Your goal isn't to solve your team's problems because "that's your job."

Your job, first, is to help people find their own ways to solve them. Without needing you to step in.

If you leave them the chance to solve it themselves, while supervising and following up, you're building their skills.

You step in if they can't. Or if they don't want to, because they don't yet have the courage or the skills.

Leave your judgment out of it

Your judgment can get in the way, and create more problems than it solves. It often rests on unchecked assumptions.

The truth isn't in one person's story, or in the other's.

In every situation, there are perceptions. Sometimes, simply clarifying them is enough to untangle the conflict.

2. Should I step in?

You don't have to step into every problem on your team. You step in when the conflict starts to affect:

- **the work**: delays, mistakes, information no longer flowing;

- **the climate**: tension in meetings, coworkers picking sides, people avoiding each other.

If it does, you no longer have a choice. If not, you prefer to make people responsible.

The 2 questions to ask yourself before stepping in

1. **How would my intervention actually help?** For example: two people avoid each other, the team is starting to feel it, and they can't find a solution alone. Then it's your role to help find one.
2. **By stepping in, am I giving too much weight to something that could settle without me?**

First, invite the person to handle it themselves

> "Is this something you can handle?"
>
> "Is this a conversation you feel comfortable having with [name]?"
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> "What would you need to have that conversation?"
>
> "Shall we check in on Friday to see where you're at?"

You stay present: you set a follow-up. Making people responsible isn't abandoning them.

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3. One-on-one meetings: understand, don't resolve

> **The goal of these meetings isn't to resolve. It's to understand.**
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> Don't walk in with a conviction. Don't walk in "to sort this out quickly." Ask as many questions as you can, and listen.

Be ready for discomfort

These meetings can be uncomfortable, for you and for the person.

Especially when silence sets in: let it last, it's part of the conversation. Sometimes you'll have to dig for the information to come out.

To open, without asserting anything

> "What happened with [name]?"
>
> "Has anything in particular happened in the last few days that you'd like to talk to me about?"
>
> "I sense something isn't right in the team. How are you experiencing it?"

To prompt them further, once they've spoken

Prompt them: that's how they'll open up. Two prompts to keep at hand:

"How do you feel about that?"

"Can you tell me more?"

To dig deeper

"What matters most to you in this situation?"

"How do you think [name] sees the situation?"

"What have you already tried?"

"What would actually help you?"

"Is there anything else I should know?"

To close the meeting

"Thank you for speaking openly. I'll also meet with [name]. My goal is to understand, not to decide who's right."

What to avoid in these meetings

- giving your opinion, or saying who's right;
- offering a solution before you've heard both people;
- reporting to one what the other said;
- asking questions that already contain the answer ("Don't you think they're overreacting?").

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4. Deciding what comes next

Once you've heard both people, two options:

- **They can settle it between themselves.** You invite them to, and you set a follow-up.
- **A joint meeting is needed.** Because the conflict affects the work or the climate, and they can't settle it alone.

Bringing them together isn't mandatory. It's a choice you make once you understand.

Letting them know, and welcoming resistance

Tell each person before the joint meeting. Expect resistance: it's normal, and it isn't a refusal to work.

"I'd like the three of us to meet. Not to find someone to blame: so we understand how each of you experienced the situation."

"I understand this feels uncomfortable. What worries you about this meeting?"

"You don't have to agree with everything. I'm asking you to listen, and to be heard."

5. The joint meeting

The ground rules, stated explicitly at the start

Say them out loud, and ask each person whether they accept them.

1. Each person speaks in turn, without being interrupted.
2. We describe facts and how we felt. Not the other person's intentions.
3. We speak in "I": "I experienced...", not "You always...".
4. Before replying, we rephrase what the other person just said.
5. We look for what will work going forward. We don't look for someone to blame.
6. Anyone can ask for a pause.
7. What's said here stays here.

To open

"Thank you for being here. The goal of this meeting is first to understand how each of you experienced the situation."

"Here are the ground rules I suggest. Do you accept them?"

Step 1 · Understand: each person tells their story

"[Name], can you tell us what happened, from your point of view?"

"How did you feel at that moment?"

"Can you tell us more?"

Step 2 · Clarify perceptions

"What do you hear in what [name] just said?"

"If I understand correctly, you experienced [X], and you, [Y]. Is that right?"

"What surprises you in what the other person experienced?"

This is often where the conflict untangles: each person discovers how the other perceived it.

Step 3 · Name the needs

"What do you need, concretely, for this to work again?"

"What do you both want, for the work and for the team?"

Step 4 · Look for solutions together

"What can each of you do starting tomorrow?"

"What can you already agree on?"

Let them propose. You help, rephrase, and check it's realistic. You don't hand them the solution.

Step 5 · Write the agreement

"Who does what, starting when? Let's write it down together."

"Let's meet again in two weeks to see if it's holding."

6. After: the follow-up

- Send a written summary of the agreement to both people.
- Check in on the agreed date: "Is it holding? What's working? What's stuck?"
- Quietly observe the dynamic over the following weeks.
- If the conflict flares up again, go back to step 3: understand what changed.

7. Traps to avoid

- Trying to resolve before you understand.
- Walking in with a conviction, or an unchecked assumption.
- Siding with the person you like more, or who complains the loudest.
- Solving the problem for them when they could have done it themselves.
- Wanting them to "like each other": the goal is for them to work well together.

- Leaving without a written agreement or a follow-up date.

Is this conflict weighing on your team?

In express coaching, we prepare your meetings together: your questions, your words, your plan B. 30 minutes.

ayoubchobah.com/en/express-coaching/book