

How To Handle Conflicts And Difficult Situations

As a new engineering graduate who recently joined an aerospace company, I encountered a volatile situation at work during my very first project. Each of the software engineers on the team, which was tasked with delivering a test program for a fighter aircraft, owned a specific software module of the overall program. In order for the program to work properly, all the modules had to integrate seamlessly and work flawlessly together. When I and another senior programmer - Jim, who had been working at this company for several years, tried to integrate our respective modules, they failed to work. This was a bit of a disaster since other team members couldn't move forward without our successful integration. When this failure occurred, Jim's face started to get red and formed an angry expression and he began yelling at me, blaming the failure on me and saying my program was a piece of "crap" (he used a more colorful word). Throughout your career, you will face difficult situations –work conflicts, unexpected events or surprises that will test your ability to stay calm, keep poise under pressure and think on your feet. These situations could arise from any number of circumstances - dealings with co-workers, company management to external parties, including customers, partners and suppliers.

While it is impossible to anticipate and prepare for every situation, there is a basic approach you can apply to any situation. In this chapter, I'll discuss the general best practices and behavior we should utilize when facing a challenging situation. In addition, I'll cover some specific scenarios, their unique differences and the best ways to handle them.

Common Approach

Whether you face a conflict with a co-worker, your boss or a customer, there is a set of principle practices to follow:

- **Keep your professionalism.** Stay calm and resist the temptation to give in to your emotions. If someone is yelling at you or making demeaning remarks, it's easy to return the favor and lash out at them. If you do that, the two of you will appear to other people like unprofessional people behaving immaturely. In Eckhart Tolle's book "The Power of Now," he talked about handling your emotion and how to control your urge to lash out (Tolle, 1992). While it may make you feel good temporarily when you lash out and say something you may regret later, it may damage your chances in the long run to have good working relationships. The first step is to acknowledge the emotions you're feeling, such as anger. Just acknowledging your feelings will help you calm down and reduce your urge to strike back. Also keep in mind that when you let your emotions dictate your action, you are giving your "power" to the other person. Ask yourself if the other person is that powerful for you to lose your control and give him the power over your reaction. The answer is most likely no. When you feel increasingly upset, acknowledge your emotions and take a break. Avoid an unnecessary emotional confrontation by walking away, even for just a few minutes. Similarly, when you are in a tense situation and feeling a lot of pressure, don't deny it. You have heard of the expression "poise under pressure" – it's the ability to stay calm and think

rationally. You can do this by acknowledging your feeling at the moment – tense, pressure, scared, etc. Then take deep breaths to calm yourself down and maintain your professionalism by not blaming others, looking for excuses or behaving immaturely. If you're not familiar with this kind of self-control practice, continue to patiently work on it, and over time you will gain more emotional discipline.

- **Focus on listening.** When faced with a conflict, we have a tendency to jump to conclusions and solutions right away without understanding first. Lack of communication or miscommunication often is the root of a conflict. When people are talking over each other instead of stepping back and listening to what the other person is saying, confusion and misunderstanding can happen as a result. Then as things escalate, they become more personal, emotional and before they know it, things have blown up into a real conflict. Sometimes what we thought we heard is not what the other person meant. To avoid this, ask: “what I hear you say is ABC.... did I hear correctly?” or “Can you give me an example...?” When you ask for clarification, you put the onus on that person to explain. Moreover, when people see that you're listening, they feel assured they're being heard, and this helps create a good communication channel which encourages them to be open minded to your views.
- **Be prepared as best you can.** In any conflict or difficult situation, the more details we know about the situation, the better we are at keeping an open mind and being able to use our creativity to come up with the best solution possible. Some of the situational details include the nature of the conflict, possible causes, people involved, any impact on them and external factors that come into play. With the knowledge and information we have, we are in a better position to help get everyone on the same page and work to come up with the best solution. Spend time upfront to really understand the issue by talking and listening to the key stakeholders.
- **Use a logical problem solving approach.** The first step in solving any problem is to define clearly what the problem is. It's not uncommon to see some people on the team trying to solve a problem while others have a different understanding of what the problem is that they're trying to solve. It's important to make sure everyone have the same understanding. This misunderstanding happens often in business negotiations where one party is working on one issue while the other party is focusing on a different one. Secondly, once the problem is understood, find out possible causes of the problem. The third step is work with key stakeholders to brainstorm possible solutions and weigh the pros and cons of the different options. And finally, choose the best option among the ones considered.

How To Deal With Difficult Situations

Now, let's look at several different scenarios and discuss them in more detail using the suggested approach above.

1. **Difficult customer.** A customer is unhappy because your company didn't meet its commitment and may make life difficult for you when you meet them. It may be obvious but needs to be repeated that it's especially important to be professional and use your listening skills in this situation. Let the customer vent; listen and make sure you understand their issues. Moreover, when you interact with them, remember you're representing your company and not just the department you work in. Avoid blaming others in the company or being defensive that the customer is taking it out on you when it's not your fault. The customer doesn't care about your company problems and since you represent the company, you need to answer to the customer. Moreover, you need to be clear on the resolution or the next steps before you leave the meeting and make sure you follow up accordingly.

Let me repeat a story I told in the “How to communicate and present to different audiences” chapter. I once took a customer visit trip with the purpose of getting their input on a future printer technology. Per my request, the account Sales Representative (SR) set up the meeting for me. When a co-worker and I arrived and met a couple of executives from the customer’s company, they proceeded to lay into us about issues they had with their computer systems and their dissatisfaction with our company. We could sense their frustration and anger as the volume of their voices got louder. We were caught completely by surprise since we had no prior warnings from the SR. To make the situation worse, he wasn’t there to handle these issues with the customer and since we were from the printer business unit, we were in the dark about their computer system issues. There was only one thing we could do - we sat down and listened patiently to the customer. We asked questions to make sure we captured their problems accurately. When the customers were done venting and giving us a list of items they wanted answers on, we calmly thanked them for their feedback. We told them that although we were not involved in these issues, we will make sure that the right people from the company work on their request and get back to them quickly.

After this resolution, the customers felt their concerns were heard and were satisfied with the next steps. They calmed down, listened and discussed our company printing technology and even spent an extra hour with us on this topic. I also learned a good lesson from this visit - I should have talked with the SR to understand more about the customers and any potential issues I needed to be aware of and to address before I met them.

2. **Work conflict/difficult situation with co-workers.** One typical scenario here is you and other people are working on a project in which everyone’s work is an important part of the overall project and if one person delivers subpar work, the whole project would be negatively impacted. You discover a co-worker’s deliverables are not up to the team’s standard. You want to let him know but you also know he has a big ego, is sensitive to criticism and does not have to answer to you. What do you do?

We’ll apply the approach we discussed at beginning of this chapter to this scenario. In this situation, focus on the business issue at hand. The key here is trying to understand, giving constructive feedback and emphasizing his ownership of the team’s goals.

Approach the person to confirm or clarify his understanding of the team’s goals to make sure that you and he are on the same page. If he doesn’t have the same understanding of the team goals, that could indicate the root cause of the problem. The team project’s goals should be clearly written and communicated to everyone on the team. Go over these goals with him if you need to. Before discussing his specific work, ask for his feedback on the status of the team project and suggestions for improvement. Then tell him you have some constructive feedback and suggestions for his work. The key word here is “constructive” feedback, not negative criticism. Again, focus your feedback on his work and not him as a person. Give specific examples. For example: “the ROI analysis was missing key assumptions to validate the results” as opposed to “You completely missed the boat on the ROI analysis.” Emphasize to him that everyone’s work is critical to the overall project and if someone doesn’t deliver their best work, the whole team suffers. Then offer your help and close the meeting with the timeline for him to review his work with the team again. If your message doesn’t get through, suggest to him that the team may need to ask management for help to make sure they deliver the best results possible.

Let’s take another real life example of a story I heard from a friend and former colleague. Henry worked as software (SW) Test Engineer on an engineering team. The team was on the hook to deliver and launch a new application on schedule. When going through the testing, Henry

discovered the program was buggy and had logic errors. One of the SW programmers he needed cooperation from was very protective of his work and sensitive to criticism. Tom, a senior SW engineer, had been with the company for several years and believed there was nothing wrong with his work. He didn't want to cooperate and would get offended if the test team approached him about his software code. The test team thought it was possible the issue could be his code but not sure. How would you handle this situation? Would you take him to the woodshed and read him the riot act? Or do you escalate this to management immediately and force him to cooperate.

I asked Henry how he handled this situation. He said he approached this with an open mind without assuming that the issue was Tom's code. He dealt with this difficult situation professionally and focused only on the business issue. He approached Tom to explain that the overall program was not working and it was critical to find out the root causes so the problem could be fixed. Henry then asked him for his thoughts on the possible causes and how to go about diagnosing the software bugs. This assuaged Tom from getting defensive or feeling he was being blamed. At the same time, Henry put the onus on him to get involved. Tom's demeanor changed and he suggested a couple of good ideas to go about discovering the bugs, including comprehensive integration testing of everyone's code. Henry then confirmed with Tom that the testing would include his code as well. The lesson here is by focusing on the business problem and having Tom involved in helping find the solution, Henry was successful in addressing this sensitive issue with him.

Let's assume despite all the effort from Henry, Tom remained stubborn and uncooperative. I would suggest the next step is to escalate to management for help to resolve the issue. Henry should also let Tom know he would bring this situation to management. At least Tom would be in no position to complain since Henry is not going behind his back and he knows Henry had tried his best reaching out to him.

Regarding my situation where my co-worker Jim was blaming me and throwing me under the bus, it was just as easy for me to point fingers back at him and get into a pissing contest. However, I chose to maintain my cool and waited until he had yelled enough. Then I calmly told him that the yelling was unprofessional and wasn't going to solve the problem. I then told him we needed to find the root causes so we can fix them. And if it turned out it was my work, then I would be happy to acknowledge my error and fix it. He was taken somewhat aback that I didn't lash back at him and he seemed a bit embarrassed. After working together for the next couple of days, we were able to diagnose the problem, fix it and move the project forward. The next day, he apologized to me for his outburst. After that incident, Jim was more aware of his behavior and controlled his emotions better, at least with me. We continued to have a good professional working relationship. By not reacting badly back at him, I gave him an out and that enabled us to continue our working relationship. I was in control of the situation.

3. **Conflict or difficult situation with your boss.** A conflict arises when your boss assigns you additional work when you are completely swamped. You might feel upset that your boss doesn't appreciate you have too much work already. You may feel you're being taken advantage of and your boss doesn't care he's driving you too hard. You don't want to take on this new assignment. How would you handle this?

Treat this as a negotiation session on how to say no. Refer to the "How to say no smartly" chapter for suggestions. The key again is to focus on the business issue and not get personal or emotional. Don't assume your boss knows how much work you have on your plate. Give him the benefit of the doubt. He is likely busy and not always able to keep tabs on your workload. The way to

approach this is to give your boss visibility of your workload and have him prioritize for you. This gets him involved in solving this issue with you.

First, explain all the tasks you have on your plate, the effort and time they require and be clear with him that it is not possible for you to take on more. However, you would be happy to take this work on if you can drop something else off your plate. Next, ask him to prioritize how important his request is relative to your current tasks. This forces him to evaluate carefully. If he prioritizes his request higher than your other assignments, then it would be reasonable to delay or drop the less important priorities. You need to be firm on this – if you take it on, something has to go. Or if he sees that his request isn't important enough, he can assign it to someone else who may not have as much going on. Either way, it is a win/win situation for you and your boss.

4. **Pressure situation with executives.** There will be times in meetings when management may grill you with tough questions or challenge your work. Normally, they're not doing this to be mean. Rather, they want to test if you have done your homework, thought things through and could back it up. How well you prepared for meetings like this will determine how you will perform. If you are prepared you will come to the meeting with confidence and that will carry you through. Refer to the "How to communicate and present to specific audiences" and "How to organize and develop presentation content" chapters to help you prepare and conduct yourself in the meeting.

To prepare answering questions from executives, put yourself in their shoes and ask what tough questions you would ask yourself. Since you know the content of your material, think about where you are vulnerable and where the potential holes or weaknesses are. Ask yourself tough questions about those areas and figure out how you would answer them. Executives tend to see the big picture and ask open ended questions such as: "Where do you see the risks of your project?", "What if things don't go as planned?," "What is your contingency plan?," "What are your key assumptions?," "What key stakeholders have you talked to?" and "What are the key requirements to achieve success?" Some executives are number centric and would focus on your analysis to test for discrepancies. While you can't anticipate every question, preparing yourself with these questions and answers will give you the confidence and the ability to think on your feet when you get a question you had not thought of.

If you get questions from the executives, don't appear ruffled, even if you feel tense and nervous. Remind yourself that you have done your best to prepare and to project confidence. Appearing timid or unsure about your recommendation will not instill confidence in the executives. Even if you're coming to the meeting not fully prepared and hoping the management team will give you a pass, you need to do your best to maintain your poise. Here are some ways to handle yourself professionally in this type of situation.

- If you get a question you don't know the answer off hand but can get the answer later, "Good question. I don't have the answer off the top of my head but I can find out and get back to you after this meeting" is a perfectly fine answer.
- If you are asked to give an opinion but you want to think about it before answering, you can buy some time. For example: "Great question. I'd like to give that some thought. Can I think about it a little bit and get back to you?" While the meeting is going on, you can think about that question in the back of your mind and get back to the questioner later in the meeting when ready. This is a good and professional way to handle this type of question.
- If an executive expresses doubt about your analysis or recommendation, don't get defensive. Focus on the business issue. Ask for clarification from the executive, such as: "Can you help me understand the specific area of your concern?" or "What I heard is that you're not sure about my conclusion on ABC because I didn't show enough data to support it, is that right?" When you get the clarification, you will more likely be able to respond better. Don't get

- flustered when they push you. Sometimes they want to see how strong your conviction is on the recommendation. If you did not have enough data or analysis to support your argument, acknowledge their question and propose to come back with more analysis. For example: “Thank you for the question. Let me look into this further and get back to you with a more detailed analysis.”
- If an executive starts to drill down on your data and rat hole on the numbers, try not to get dragged down this path. It’s a no win situation and distracts everyone from the meeting’s objective. Instead of focusing on the results, focus on your assumptions. For example, you may say: “Since the outcomes of the analysis are the results of the assumptions, let me show you my assumptions to get your thoughts and we can debate on the validity of these assumptions.” Then proceed with your assumptions. By definition, assumptions are your educated guesses on the future or on the unknown, so they are not right or wrong at the moment. Therefore, the assumptions are open for debate and you can modify your analysis if the assumptions change. By handling things this way, you’re being mature, professional and show you are open to people’s opinions. If some assumptions need to be modified, thank the executives and say you will look at the analysis again based on the new assumption changes. In this process, you have gotten the executives to get involved and take some ownership of your work.

5. **How to handle surprises in real time.** Last minute surprises are toughest to handle. One of my former companies hosts an annual customer event in New York where the company invites a couple hundred customers - executives from Fortune 1000 companies to come for updates on the company’s future plan and strategy. We usually offer simultaneous sessions for the guests to choose which ones to attend. At this event one year, our server business unit was allocated a big portion of the agenda to present to customers and we planned to have three speakers for this talk – two co-workers and me. On the morning of the presentation, the two co-workers were nowhere to be found. Moreover, the presentation materials the team worked on were on their laptops. We received no answer calling their hotel rooms or cell phones. Then we received a fifteen minute heads up and my manager was now in full panic mode. We asked another business unit to present in our time slot but they weren’t ready either.

Out of desperation, I told a Sales Account Manager I had worked with about our predicament and asked her if she had any idea. She thought for a couple of minutes and then suggested I could buy some time by opening the session and inviting the customers to give feedback on any topics they want. And it would be a great opportunity for the company top executives to hear their feedback directly. That was as good of an idea as any and I informed my boss of the plan. To my pleasant surprise, the feedback discussion went on for over an hour and was so successful I had a difficult time stopping the customer discussion so we could proceed with our presentation. The two missing speakers finally made it there after thirty minutes into the session. Afterward, many of the customers thanked my boss and even suggested that every future session should allocate time for customer feedback. We heaved a sigh of relief because of how close we cut it.

The lesson learned here is to think of possible unexpected events and to prepare for them as best you can. And if it does happen, stay calm and keep your poise in order to think creatively and engage the right people for help.