



by George Page

Meetings of Conflict

You've got a dilemma. It could be an important task was not finished, a deadline hasn't been met, or mistakes were made. Any or all of these could mean the difficulty is with an employee, but just one combined with a bad attitude and you've got a problem. In a politically correct world, it may be difficult to deal with a poorly performing employee head on. So what do you do when you're heading for conflict?

So you have a problem, screw-up, or "last straw." What should you do about it? Let's start with the obvious what not to dos. Hunting the employee down and yelling at them is a bad idea. To the other extreme, ignoring the situation is just as bad. Quick judgments are something to avoid. Public recriminations, declarations, and announcements should not be made either. Remember, praise in public, punish in private.

After those knee-jerk reactions, take a deep breath and look at the situation objectively. Identify specific problem areas, and then identify the specific problem items. You're looking for exactly how you got from good to bad. What is askew? What specifically did the employee do? Sometimes the answers will be obvious, but at times they will be more subtle. Take your time and get to the details.

You now know what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. Now examine the employee's role. What was accident and what was intentional? Could this have been avoided by better training, or with a better attitude? It should be possible to examine your employee and their actions, and realize exactly where the real problem lies.

Once you have all the information, you need to decide what to do about it. Is the underlying problem with the employee? If so, would more training or education avoid future mistakes? If not, and the real crisis is a bad attitude, a talk is best, but get ready for conflict.

Before you meet with the employee, you need to identify your goals. Really, ask yourself what you really want to have happen. If the best solution is simply to fire the employee, then do it. If you just want a particular area improved, or a repeatable mistake not to repeat, then identify specifically what needs to happen. Make a list of your points, what you expect from the employee, and what they need to do from now on. Keep in mind that you are not making a black vs. white decision. Working with the employee to fix the problem does not mean that you are surrendering the option to fire. If you meet and the employee's actions, words, or attitude will not coincide with your goals, then you know the best thing to do. You are giving them an opportunity to continue working there, not a guarantee.



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To ensure that all goes smoothly, you should treat the situation and the employee with formal dignity. For example, send an official invitation to the employee with a specific date and time to have a meeting. This formality guarantees that the demeanor of the employee at the meeting will match your invitation. Let them know what the meeting is for as well. Include pertinent details, but don't elaborate. This information sharing would give them an opportunity to create excuses and/or fabricate lies, but if those were necessary, you would have simply fired them out of hand. In actuality, you will be giving them time to reflect upon what they did, why they are in trouble, and possible solutions. By not being blindsided and having time to think, they will be able to contribute better to solving the problem.

You have done your research, made decisions, notified the employee, and now it's time to have the meeting. Some things to keep in mind are to continue the formal tone as well as showing respect. If you treat them in this way, they will subconsciously match you. Always consider your end goals. For example, the employee may get defensive or angry and shutting them down would feel good. However, this would probably guarantee failure to resolve the problems and salvage the employee. Little victories won at too much cost will jeopardize your ultimate goals.

Have the "Three C's" at the forefront of your mind: Calm, Cool, Collected. This is important. You are going into a conflict situation. The employee may react badly, loudly, or defensively. They may lash out. Depending on the circumstances, these reactions may or may not be excused. No matter what, you need to stay: Calm, Cool, and Collected. If you fail in this, you run the great risk that your meeting will quickly crash and burn, or at the very least will not be near as effective as you hoped it would be.

The Three C's mean that you will not react to barbs, personal or otherwise. You will not raise your voice. You will not counterattack, balk, get angry, or "lose it." If you follow the Three C's, the employee will calm themselves down after an outburst. Often, maintaining the Three C's will be extremely difficult, but if you want get your goals accomplished, you have to stay Calm, Cool, and Collected.

When discussing the problem, stay on task. Don't let the meeting get sidetracked into irrelevant "who-did-what" arguments. The damage is done and the point of your meeting is to keep further damage from happening. So your discussion should not be "why did you do this?" but "how can we not do this in the future?" Your employee should realize that you are not trying to punish them, but simply to resolve the situation. You may already have the best solution, but keep an open mind. You're keeping this employee for a reason and since they are in the thick of the problem area... they just might have a better idea.



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If you do your research, plan ahead, set the right tone, stay Calm, Cool, and Collected, always think of the end goal, and keep an open mind, you will have a good meeting and possibly a great employee. Meetings of conflict are often daunting, but made more so often by our own attitudes leading up to, and during the meetings. If you remove key conflict causing human habits, your meetings of conflict will become meetings of resolution.