

# Resolving Conflict In The Workplace— And Why Common Sense Isn't Enough

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**W**orkplace conflicts have been in the news lately—the tumult at OpenAI is just one example. At businesses large and small, when employees operate in shared spaces, workplace conflict can easily crop up—and morph into significant challenges.

The more intimate environment at a small business can often magnify the impact of workplace disputes, and small business owners aren't typically equipped to resolve any conflict.

However, effective conflict resolution is essential for maintaining a healthy work culture. To learn more about how entrepreneurs can ease the conflicts in their businesses, I talked to Richard Birke, a leading conflict resolution practitioner and VP and executive director of the JAMS Institute, the largest private provider of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) services globally. Birke is also the chief architect behind JAMS Pathways, where business leaders can learn how to navigate and mitigate conflict in their businesses.

## Strategies for resolving workplace conflicts

**Rieva Lesonsky:** What are the most common workplace conflicts that arise in small businesses?

**Richard Birke:** There's no single category or type of conflict. People and workplaces are very different, and the conflicts are unique to those people and circumstances. That said, almost all conflict starts with inadequate communication.

When people work on a project together, they may think they've communicated or fully understood

something, but sometimes they haven't. If a mistake is made, the temperature of the workplace can go up. People usually aren't communicating at their best when conflict arises, which can lead to a spiral that manifests in a wide array of disputes—from yelling to quiet quitting to actual quitting.

A second leading source of conflict is perceived inequities. Some are based on personal characteristics (behaviors or actions that may be the precursors to discrimination lawsuits), and others on workload, benefits, and perceived intangibles (does the [boss] play favorites?). Many of the issues that emerge from this category stem from a failure of leadership to communicate the reasons underlying differential treatment.

**Lesonsky:** Are there conflict resolution strategies that cater to the unique dynamics and challenges small businesses face?

**Birke:** Yes. The primary thing needed is a person or group of people trained in the basics of conflict management, such as interest-based bargaining, having difficult conversations, understanding different personality types, knowing the laws and regulations governing the workplace, and active listening. Training is the single most valuable investment a manager can make.

Many people rise to leadership positions after demonstrating proficiency in a specific task. Good surgeons become managers of surgeons. Professors who write a lot of books become deans. Talented carpenters manage projects and personnel. When a person moves from the

rank and file to a supervisory position, they should recognize that what got them there is a different set of skills than what will be required going forward.

The training must be customized to the business and the people working there.

**Lesonsky:** How can effective conflict resolution positively impact a small business's overall health and success?

**Birke:** That's such an easy story to tell. Happy, engaged workers feel psychologically safe. People who like their jobs don't quit—quietly or otherwise. And most importantly, everyone is focused on getting the main job done. Precious time and energy are directed where they should be—to the present and the future—rather than fixing problems.

**Lesonsky:** What role do employee engagement and satisfaction play in conflict resolution strategies?

**Birke:** There are different schools of thought on this topic. Some folks believe that employee engagement and satisfaction are the only goals of an effective conflict resolution process—whether or not the employee gets what they want. Others say that it's all about outcomes. A good outcome will be seen as fair, resulting in employee engagement and satisfaction.

One is all about the process, and the other is all about the substance. A great conflict manager will attend to both and make people feel engaged during the process and satisfied with the outcome.

**Lesonsky:** What's the typical time frame

that it takes to resolve conflict?

**Birke:** I've been involved in the resolution of misunderstandings that took one question and 90 seconds to resolve, as well as those that lingered for 35 years.

A lot can be done in a few hours if that time is used wisely. Usually, conflict is resolved through conversation, but it has to be structured and conducted effectively; otherwise, what could have been a quick and easy fix (done in a day) could turn into something that carries on for weeks or longer.

**Lesonsky:** Is the goal of conflict resolution to solve a "situation," or does it lead to discovering underlying issues in a small business?

**Birke:** Both. There are one-offs, but that's

rare. A conflict usually reveals something about the people involved and/or the workplace itself. It's useful to consider whether a particular conflict would benefit from a systemic change, and the answer is usually yes. Whether implementing a fix is cost- or time-efficient is a different question.

**Lesonsky:** Anything you'd like to add?

**Birke:** Don't assume that conflict resolution can be achieved with common sense alone. While we all have been learning how to deal with other people since the day we were born, very few of us study how to negotiate optimally, avoid or dampen conflict, and resolve it when it arises. Yet many people assume they can intuit their way through every kind of

conflict. And for a lot of people and a lot of situations, that may often be true, but not always.

There's a treasure trove of conflict resolvers out in the world—a small but significant population of mediators, ombuds, facilitators, and the like. I'd just ask that people recognize that when they are out of their depth, hiring a pro to resolve a conflict is not an admission of weakness but rather an act of strength and courage.

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**R**ichard Birke is the chief architect of JAMS Pathways and is experienced at resolving complex, multiparty disputes. In his 35-plus-year career in hands-on dispute resolution, Richard has been invited by a variety of constituencies to intervene in large conflicts—political, environmental, commercial and beyond. He has taught dozens of innovative courses around the world, given hundreds of speeches and won national awards for his writing on the psychology and neuroscience of mediation and negotiation.