

# Resolving uncomfortable interactions and conflict at work

## Introduction

A much shortened version of this article appeared in the Phnom Penh Post in early 2009. Since then, we have done a lot of “conflict management” and “managing difficult conversations” training. Over the years, with successful growth and expansion of our business, we have had to deal with resolution of conflict and uncomfortable interactions in the workplace – not only in one location, but across provinces and beyond borders. Whether a difference of opinion amongst management or a team dispute, what we have learned from conflict is that, **if managed effectively and we take a step back and listen, conflict brings out the best each one of us as individuals and a team.**

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*“I always prefer to believe in the best of people, it saves me so much time!”*

*Rudyard Kipling*

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Today, we are elaborating on **“Resolving conflict and uncomfortable interactions at work”**. At HRINC we know, that the challenges we face as a growing SME are very often challenges that our clients and extended network of young and seasoned professionals face, every day.

We can all recall an uncomfortable interaction or situation at work – with a colleague, a subordinate or manager and even within our teams. As managers, we have experienced that strange silence in the room, where everyone looks down! Or, someone has finally had enough and just lets it all out making a manager look bad, or a team member crumble. In the worst case scenarios – an employee resigns as they have had enough.

**Uncomfortable interactions at work can be healthy**, surprising as that may sound, if they are managed effectively, and you are able to harness the power of differences in opinion and approaches. But in extreme cases, uncomfortable interactions become conflict and can be very stressful for everyone involved. **Conflict results in poor staff morale, high staff turnover, low productivity, and lack of innovation.**

**It is important to be able to deal with uncomfortable situations and conflict effectively**, as the rewards and outcomes are greater sometimes than we know. What can we say at HRINC these rewards and outcomes are from effectively managing an uncomfortable situation or conflict?

1. We create **productive relationships** that **learn to leverage the strengths** of each other
2. We enable team members to **respect** each other and their views and see that **everyone contributes to success**
3. We **propel success and innovation** by identifying real issues, by removing the personal dislike or attack
4. We create **productive and constructive workplace relationships** where we leverage the strengths, skills and knowledge of each other.
5. We create **cohesive and constructive teams** who use conflicting ideas and approaches to their advantage and by so doing they work towards and achieve the best outcomes for the client and company; and finally,
6. As managers and leaders, we have over time learned to deal with tougher situations with a greater sense of **confidence and appreciation** that we are a facilitators, **leveraging the best out of people** and leading them to great accomplishments.

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*“Ultimately, in all spheres of life, we don’t need to be best friends with everyone. What we do need to do is learn to foster and build exceptional professional relationships and networks, and learn that diversity and differences of opinion and way of working, are what makes companies great!”*

*HRINC Managing Director*

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All that said, we know that dealing with uncomfortable situations and conflict is not easy. Like an art, it takes time and experience to master the skills and know when to intervene or seek help. It takes **patience, courage and confidence, to not**

**doubt oneself** and keep going in the face of a conflict. And today, we continue to learn and manage uncomfortable situations and conflict because it is something that is inherent to the diversity of our workplaces.

### The reality is, we cannot avoid uncomfortable situations and conflict

Uncomfortable situations and conflict will occur at some point in time. This does not mean, however, that these situations cannot be managed and resolved. We can limit workplace conflicts by understanding the reasons why conflicts occur, identifying small conflicts or uncomfortable situations before they turn into bigger ones, anticipating conflict within our teams, and using proven techniques for resolving conflicts.

## Causes of Conflict at Work

### Social Differences: We are all different!

**Every individual is unique and has different ideas about what language and behaviour is appropriate.** In countries as diverse as ASEAN, from developed countries such as Singapore and Malaysia to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) like **Cambodia**, Laos and **Myanmar**, there are many cultural differences relating to ethnic background, religion, social status, home province, age and gender. In addition, work brings together people with very different personalities – shy or outspoken, timid or aggressive, serious or fun-loving, and team-oriented or individualistic. *Even a smile can be misleading in an uncomfortable situation or situation of conflict.*

**People also have different values, both personal and professional.** Some people are very status-conscious and believe that high status should command respect and obedience, without question. Others believe that all people are essentially equal and that everyone's views should be taken into account when making decisions.

All these personal differences and perceptions, certain language or behaviour that seems perfectly appropriate to one person might be highly offensive to others. **We all need to try to understand and respect these differences.** Take a few minutes to think from the perspectives of other people. Put yourself in their shoes. Do you really understand where they are coming from? What is important? What is appropriate behaviour?

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*“Smiling is our cultural way of dealing with disappointments and keeping a composed and non-confrontational front with our manager. We understand deeply where we went wrong and what the challenge is. Please don't have such a discussion in front of the team in the future, we lose face in front of each other which is not good.”*

*HRINC employee to foreign Manager*

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### Professional rivalry: responsibility, performance, promotion

**Other sources of conflict relate to the actual work situation.** A common flashpoint is jealousy or rivalry in Asia is regarding salaries, promotions or work allocations. Conflict can also arise over disagreements about who is responsible for group successes or failures. Understandably, an employee and their manager will sometimes have different opinions about how well the employee is performing. These tensions can quickly degenerate into vindictive and destructive office gossip, which can spiral out of control.

**It is important that managers acknowledge the successes of teams and individuals, publically and individually.** Employees should also be aware that their manager is responsible for accepting successes on behalf of the team. The manager or leader is the “front” of the team and as such, has the responsibility for accepting both the good and bad of the team in an appropriate manner.

### Differences in motivations, perceptions communication and working styles

**A classic source of conflict is that we are all so uniquely different and do things differently. We have different motivations, different ideas about what we see is important and how we communicate and approach our work.** This is driven by our

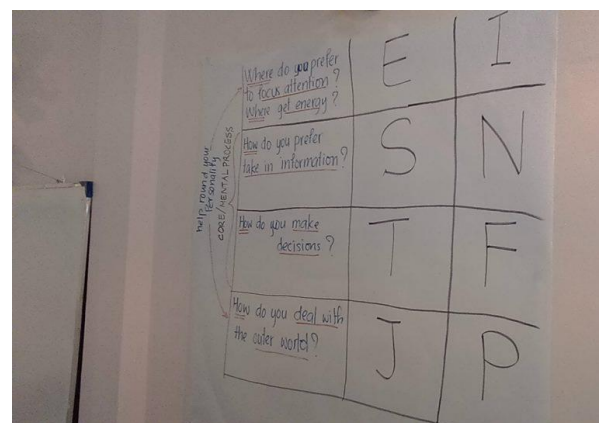
values and cultural differences as well as our respective education background. We share this table of how colourful and different our team is at HRINC.

**Table 1: Differences in motivations, perceptions, communication and working styles in the HRINC Office**

	Managing Director	Different People in the Office
<b><i>Different perceptions in working with the team</i></b>	It matters that the team is involved in providing inputs and views.	Don't spend so much time getting more work and more ideas.
<b><i>Different perceptions in understanding clients</i></b>	The client doesn't understand the context, provide your recommendation on practical application in the local context so that the client has a full understanding of their options available.	The client asked specifically about the law and what it says. The client can decide what is best for them based on what the law says.
<b><i>Different perceptions in general</i></b>	It's OK to have a bad day.	Managers must always be smiling and helpful. Never have a sad face as this demotivates people.
<b><i>Different motivations on project work</i></b>	Go above and beyond. Pay attention to details	Deliver on the terms of reference or contract. Don't be a perfectionist all the time.
<b><i>Different motivations on internal work and sharing knowledge</i></b>	This project will build capacity and better engagement.	This project will overwhelm the team and take our focus away from our core KPIs.
<b><i>Different communication styles in sending a message</i></b>	Focus on the details, context, and reasoning. Be structured and clear so that people have the information and can make informed decisions.	I wish the managing director would write less and just tell me what to do, I am also busy.
<b><i>Different communication styles in sending a message</i></b>	Be clear and to the point so that there are no misunderstandings	Tell a story with the conflict embedded in it so that no one loses face.
<b><i>Different communication styles in receiving a message</i></b>	Give me a challenge or problem with a solution based on your perspective and how you see things.	I just want an answer to the challenge. You know what is best.
<b><i>Different working styles</i></b>	Share challenges, so that we all learn. We always stand together and support each other.	Don't share challenges too broadly. Keep them contained to those involved.
<b><i>Different working styles</i></b>	Motivated by innovation, quality, details and learning.	Motivated by completion of tasks and KPIs.
<b><i>Different working styles</i></b>	Sense of urgency.	Complacency. It will eventually get done.

The power of the differences in the HRINC office, are exactly what makes us innovative and drives us every day. Different situations require us all to behave differently. As Managing Director, I know that I have had to change the way I work and engage. We have managed over the years to address small uncomfortable situations to having more serious and formal "management interventions" to deal with our different views and perspectives and will continue to leverage the differences and conflicting perspectives positively. It's an ongoing process that evolves as we evolve as a business. My team, more often than not, has a critical view on a decision or the business which I have not seen or thought about and this enables us as a Group, to grow, expand and innovate. It enables me, to remain focussed on the priorities.

The differences show that **managing expectations upwards and downwards**, is essential to managing uncomfortable situations and avoiding conflict. We need to be on the same path and going in the same direction regardless of how differently we operate.



Employee engagement and channels for feedback and inputs are essential, but so too is the maturity and ability of those of us receiving feedback. *Read the article [“Managing your Manager”](#) to get your team to manage up effectively.*

**Different situations require us to be flexible in how we manage as managers.** It’s not about “Me”, it’s about “We” and how we as a team drive the business. Some situations require more management and oversight, others require to just set the goal and the team will achieve it. The balance is a fine art and requires managers to be open to letting go, open to failure and learning so that the team can grow, open to receiving critique and ideas and taking the risks that are calculated to foster learning and innovation. The most difficult thing to achieve constructively, **is receiving critique and fostering a culture where ideas and feedback are valued**, regardless of how they are delivered, precisely because we all have a different view or perspective. This is essential to managing and reducing uncomfortable situations and conflict at work.

### Unseen Causes of Conflict

A final source of conflict is deliberate workplace intimidation or harassment, including sexual harassment. This can have devastating consequences for the victim of this abuse. Organisations should make it absolutely clear to everyone that this type of behaviour will not be tolerated.

Unseen causes of conflict are the most difficult to identify and address as they bring together all the above sources of conflict and require that a diverse working environment has a common foundation and understanding of what is appropriate professional conduct and behaviour at work. This includes professional conduct and behaviours from using bathrooms and toilet facilities to what is considered reasonable social conversation and language use amongst colleagues to dress code and understanding what constitutes intimidation, harassment and sexual harassment.

# From Conflict to Change Management

## Company policies and culture set the tone

**There are several things that organisations can do to avoid conflicts arising in the first place.** A good start is to have clear procedures in place for things like recruitment, promotion and performance evaluation and conflict management. Policies on sexual harassment, professional conduct and appropriate use of email will ensure that everyone knows what is expected of them. In addition, **staff satisfaction surveys** can act as an “early warning system” to alert senior management to potential conflicts. If you are not sure about whether or not your HR Policies and procedures are contributing to conflict, perhaps it is time to do an **HR Audit** and identify what your priorities need to be in developing your HR function and management.

It is essential to have a **structured induction program** that sets out clearly the policies and conduct of the firm and its employees. Refresher courses are essential. **Make policies and codes of conduct visual and attractive** through posters in key employee meeting areas and client engagement areas. Such visual policies constantly remind employees of their commitments and company standards. Visual policies go a long way in ensuring that professional behaviours are reinforced every day.



## Build an excellent workplace environment: foster team engagement

**Managers and employees should also look for ways to encourage team bonding, improve staff morale and create a constructive feedback environment.** Regular lunches or social activities can help people get to know each other at a personal level. *Good communication* across all levels of an organisation can also help to prevent misunderstandings and encourage a unity of purpose.

As we say at HRINC: *“It is important to remember that ultimately, in all spheres of life, you don’t need to be best friends with everyone, neither do those who are in a conflict. What we do need to do, is learn to foster and build exceptional professional relationships and networks, and learn that diversity and differences of opinion and way of working, are what makes companies great.”*



## Four steps to managing conflict as a manager

Once conflicts actually emerges, try to resolve things before they grow into something more serious. The right approach will depend on the circumstances. It might be better to simply “agree to disagree” and leave the issue alone. More likely, you will need to discuss the issue with the other person. Try to use a non-combative style (fighting approach) and follow these five simple steps:

- 1. Take a step back and reflect. Don't jump in and try be the champion.** Be aware of the barriers to resolving conflict and where you will go wrong as a manager – read the box “*Typical barriers in dealing with difficult interactions*” by Harvard Business Press. Even, cut out the barriers and share those with people who are in conflict and let them use the barriers as a tool to helping resolve conflict.
- 2. Assess the facts on hand.** What is really going on? Is it personalities? Is it differences of opinion? What is the source of the conflict?
- 3. Identify the real challenge and conflict that needs to be resolved.** Get the team to write down what they see are the challenges and take a step back to get perspective. Very often, it can be competing interests, personal ways of wanting to do things and the team has forgotten about the ultimate goal at hand. Sometimes it is power-play. Remember that it is not about changing people, but enabling people to see their differences and strengths and how they contribute to the bigger picture.
- 4. Address the feeling and emotions involved.** Feelings and emotions are often the most difficult to deal with. How you manage the emotions so that everyone comes out feeling good, is where you will shine as a manager. Get those involved to move from “I” to “we” and to respect the differences in each other.
- 5. Everyone is part of the solution:** Get everyone who is part of the conflict to be part of the solution and determine the next steps moving forward. Remember that those involved in conflict, don't need to be best friends, they need to develop excellent professional relationships and learn that diversity and differences are what makes a great team.

The most important skills you will need in managing conflict are **diagnostic and questioning skills, listening skills, ability to remain factual and neutral, ability to facilitate and be open, compromise and seek out the best in everyone, ability to help others identify where they have gone wrong, ability to help others generate ideas and get others to compromise so that everyone comes out feeling they have been fairly treated and importantly that they have learned in the process.**

**Table 2: Typical barriers to dealing with difficult interactions**

Barrier	Proactive Approach
Fear of interpersonal conflict	Acknowledge that although conflict can be uncomfortable, it's a fact of life. Focus on the positive outcomes of addressing conflict
Failure to recognize that you have a problem with another person in the workplace	Notice the quality of your workplace relationships. Ask which relationships seem tense, frustrating, or unproductive. Consider acknowledging that these relationships are hampered by difficult interactions
The belief that a difficult interaction is the fault of others	Acknowledge your role in the difficulty. Identify what you can do to improve the situation.
The conviction that other people won't change, even if you try to improve the situation.	Remind yourself that you're not trying to change another person. Rather, you want to alter the way the two of you interact. You can do that by changing your own behaviour.
The desire to accept the status quo because you're not prepared to manage the outcome of the situation	Evaluate whether the risks of the difficult interaction are worth the benefits of an improved situation. If they are, map out a plan and carry it out.
The belief that the problem will resolve itself	Remind yourself that most problems don't resolve themselves.

**Source: Harvard Business Press, Pocket Mentor, Managing Difficult Interactions**



## Make time to manage conflict effectively

As a manager trying to resolve conflict, it is important to ensure that your role is to **listen to all points of views and be objective**. You are not there to “win the argument” and get the team to agree with you and what you want to happen. Individuals involved in the conflict should not be trying to “win the argument” either. Getting people to understand each other, is what needs to be done.

Your role as manager is to **enable the team to see where they have gone wrong**, and how leveraging and respecting the different points of view, is what makes the team great. It takes time, and not always time a manager has. But not investing the time now, means you will be constantly resolving the same conflict in the future and employees will simply avoid each other and be less productive – eventually they will leave.



**It is essential that managers make the time to deal with conflict effectively** instead of just give solutions and tell people what to do – this will set an example to your team in how to manage and deal with similar situations moving forward and you will definitely have less conflict that disruptions in the workplace.

## Engage - don't hide behind emails

In almost all situations, a face-to-face discussion will be most productive – with the individuals involved and then ultimately with the team if several members are involved in conflict. To engage, means you need to be well prepared and objective. You need to step out of the conflict and have courage to tackle conflict, listen, receive critique and internalise feedback and different points of view.

While emails allow you to choose your words carefully – and give the other person time to think before responding – there is a big risk that your words will be misinterpreted during a conflict situation. A small criticism can look very aggressive in an email precisely because people are emotional. It is best to avoid emailing when you are having a conflict situation so as to make sure there are no misunderstandings.

Engagement can be formal or it can be less formal in a neutral environment where you are out of the work place environment and don't feel pressure – going for a drink or having a coffee. Don't attempt an engagement or discussion, if you are not well prepared with all the facts on hand. Always end positively. Resolving conflict requires courage and being objective and reasonable – you need to give and take, listen and learn.

## Ask for help if conflict is escalating

If trying to resolve the conflict has been unsuccessful, then you may need to seek the help of a third party. Usually, the most appropriate starting point will be the HR Manager alternately select someone who is respected and can be objective to help you manage the conflict.

Similarly, if your conflict is actually *with* your manager, then try the HR Manager or another senior manager. Once again, try to keep things informal and low-key, at least in the first instance.

If there is still no resolution, there may be a need to escalate the dispute. In larger organisations, there might be formal dispute resolution mechanisms. In smaller organisations, your only course of action might be to report the problem to a senior manager or even the managing director.

## Train and build capacity in conflict management across the organisation

**Prevention is better than cure!** We know that conflict is inevitable at some point in time – at all levels within an organisation. If not through induction programs when joining the firm, it is essential that all employees are equipped with the tools and knowledge to be able to manage and deal with conflict – from the bottom of the organisation, all the way to the top.

**So much of conflict can be avoided, if employees are provided with tools and practical advice in how to manage conflict.** It is not only the role of the manager to manage conflict, but also that of employees to play an active role in being constructive and addressing workplace conflict.

## Organisations – whether big or small – should think about the best ways to handle conflicts in their workplace.

**One good initiative is to implement a mentor system,** where each staff member is allocated somebody who they can go to for advice. Staff should know who they can approach in any situation. In response to a particular conflict, there may be a case for pro-active interventions such as anger management and stress management courses, or even psychiatric counselling.

**Create an organisation and culture where feedback (constructive and positive) is valued.** Set up regular feedback structures with employees, whether this be office meetings or team meetings or anonymous feedback forums. Catch uncomfortable situations early so that your organisation remains healthy and leverages employee feedback positively.



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**Finally, it is worth remembering that in any workplace conflict, there are no real winners if you don't take active steps to managing the conflict.**

Your attitude to resolving the conflict is most important. Whether you are trying to resolve conflict or are a part of the conflict, start out by agreeing that there is a particular situation that needs to be addressed. You can start out with agreeing to disagree on differing views, but try to get the best of the conflict, not win. You will see that conflicts can often turn into constructive debates with powerful results in which everyone does come out better for it, with a higher appreciation for diversity and respect for personal and professional differences.

**“Ultimately, in all spheres of life, we don't need to be best friends with everyone. What we do need to do, is learn to foster and build exceptional professional relationships and networks, and learn that diversity and differences of opinion and way of working, are what makes companies great.”**

This article was written by Sean Power and Sandra D'Amico and published in the Phnom Penh Post in 2009. It was updated in 2015 Sandra D'Amico, Managing Director of HRINC.

*A job isn't just a job, it consumes more than a third of your day – make sure you enjoy what you do and challenge yourself to be creative and do things differently!*

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