

Build bridges, not walls: HR strategies for navigating workplace conflict



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Introduction

It's inevitable.

Disagreements will arise in the workplace.

However, disagreements over how to structure a workflow or what the best way is to complete a task pale in comparison to the hostility of national and global conflict now spilling into the workplace.

Keeping the peace at work today can feel like a greater challenge than ever, but there are strategies you can implement to minimize conflict and maintain a healthy company culture. This guide outlines practical strategies for handling conflict in the workplace and supporting members of your global workforce residing in and interacting with customers and colleagues in active conflict zones.



Key challenges: Facing the realities of conflict in the workplace

“Conflicts in the workplace are real—and can quickly elevate when politics are thrown in the mix,” says Mary C. Long in [Reworked](#).

Arguments today are more than just the buildup of stress over project deadlines.

With **56 wars currently taking place** in the world and estimates that they affect **one in six people**, many global organizations have critical teams located in active conflict zones. It’s therefore vital for organizations to provide support for colleagues who live in these areas.



Team members may have strong opinions on these active conflicts, meaning organizations also have to manage disagreements caused by clashing political views in the workplace.

These disagreements can lead to the perfect storm of emotions, financial stress, and lower productivity—making it even more challenging for HR professionals to create a healthy company culture that helps people perform at their best.

But the good news is that the right strategies can help.

Politics always seeps into the workplace

It's nearly impossible to prevent **politics from entering the workplace**. People are passionate about it, and it often comes up naturally in conversation.

But you can put policies in place that:

- Support free speech
- Make it clear that there's no tolerance for hate speech
- Outline a code of conduct to establish a respectful and inclusive culture
- Give your people tools and training to carry out discussions in a respectful and courteous manner

These kinds of policies establish clear boundaries that lower the chances of emotions reaching the boiling point.

Incivility between colleagues

Whether due to a political disagreement or a common clash of personalities, heated emotions can often lead to workplace incivility. Talking to others disrespectfully, interrupting them, and stopping them from speaking are surprisingly common in work environments. In fact, **66 percent** of American professionals say they've experienced or witnessed incivility in the workplace.

According to the research, people who believe their workplace is uncivil are more likely to feel dissatisfied at work, say they'll leave their jobs in the next year, or lack a sense of belonging in the workplace. Addressing incivility can avoid a toxic work culture and boost teamwork, productivity, and **job satisfaction**.

Pressure to take a stance

Professionals today are more politically aware and active than ever before. Many insist on working for companies that publicly address social and political issues. But taking a stance has pros and cons.

According to recent research, **49 percent** of Gen Z professionals would not apply to a company that doesn't align with their personal views.

It's important to make it clear that everyone can have their own opinion—as long as they remain civil and respectful towards their colleagues and customers.

In most cases, remaining neutral as an organization is the best way to keep the workplace civil and prevent people from feeling alienated.

When conflict becomes a reality

While an **increasing number of workplace disagreements arise from theoretical political discussions**, political clashes are all too real for team members who reside in active conflict zones.

This adds another layer of complexity to workplace conflicts. With a globally dispersed workforce, heated discussions between colleagues who are far removed from war zones may not be sensitive to team members who face war as an everyday reality.

Work is now a place where people who suffer the firsthand effects of war and those on either side of the political divide all meet.

This means it's all the more important for your people to be well versed in conflict resolution strategies. These strategies will help build common ground between your people—regardless of their political beliefs, backgrounds, and differing opinions—and will help team members provide much-needed support to colleagues living in conflict zones.

The lasting impact of conflicts in the workplace

While stifling political talk might seem like the best solution, **it can create a strong reaction among team members** that has a lasting impact on your workplace.

The impact of these conflicts can be positive or negative. How the company handles them matters.

It's best to encourage respectful open dialogue around sensitive issues. Providing training that develops **empathy** and unity among your people is key—from the highest-level decision-makers to middle managers and individual contributors.



How to support people in active conflict zones

Conflict in the workplace is one thing, but active conflict zones are another matter entirely. It can be difficult to know what to do, or say when team members are living in a conflict zone.

What are the best ways to support them? It helps to start with the basics. Below are a few recommended practices:

Promote psychological safety

Team members residing in conflict zones may experience regular threats to their physical safety. It helps to ensure they at least feel psychologically safe at work.

You can do this by:

- **Providing counseling services.** Whether through an employee assistance program (EAP), one-on-one sessions, group therapy, or resilience circles, counseling services can create a safe psychological space for professionals in conflict zones.
- **Holding training sessions.** It can be difficult for team members to know what to say to colleagues who are living in a war zone. Holding training sessions for international team members on how to speak to colleagues living in conflict areas can help. These sessions could include updates on what the situation is on the ground for civilians so everyone can understand the impact. HR can also hold one-on-one sessions with managers on empathy because effectively managing such a difficult and sensitive situation depends on the efficacy of middle managers.

- **Having honest conversations.** Sometimes it can be as simple as being available to talk more. In a conversation HiBob had with **Karen Longest**, people operations manager at MedPharm, Karen said that it's important to “have straight-up conversations with employees directly affected by conflicts. How are you handling this? Do you need someone to talk to? What can we do to help you right now? It's important to acknowledge mental stressors and to have empathy.” Following these conversations, you can offer people more leave, with or without pay, as a way of supporting them.
- **Focusing on wellbeing.** Most importantly, encourage team members to focus on how individuals are doing rather than on their political views. Otherwise, this can make colleagues living in conflict zones feel even more isolated.

Provide physical support

It might be difficult for team members in conflict zones to access certain goods and services—you can provide these for them through meal trains or mobile pantries (which can be a big help, especially for working parents or people with physical disabilities).

Colleagues in conflict zones may not be able to work at full capacity physically or psychologically. Delegate tasks more liberally across your international teams to alleviate deadline stress for those in these situations.

This will ensure business continuity and help global team members feel like they're genuinely supporting their peers.

Offer exceptional schedule flexibility

Circumstances can change abruptly in a conflict zone, meaning that people who live there may not be physically able to work.

Leverage the power of your international team. Explain that schedule changes may happen suddenly and that people living in safer and more peaceful geographies may need to give more of their time to support their colleagues living in conflict.





TIP: Best practices for absence management and lower capacity

Team members living in conflict zones may have a lower work capacity and may be more absent from work.

Tracking the capacity of these team members can help managers and business decision-makers maintain realistic workload expectations and give them a clear picture of how war is impacting the business's overall output capacity.

To monitor workforce capacity, track the percentage of team members who are able to work full-time (100 percent) or part-time (less than 100 percent)—or who can't work at all (0 percent).

Tracking capacity empowers middle managers with the tools and resources they need to strategically delegate work across global teams, providing support to those who can't carry out their work as normal.

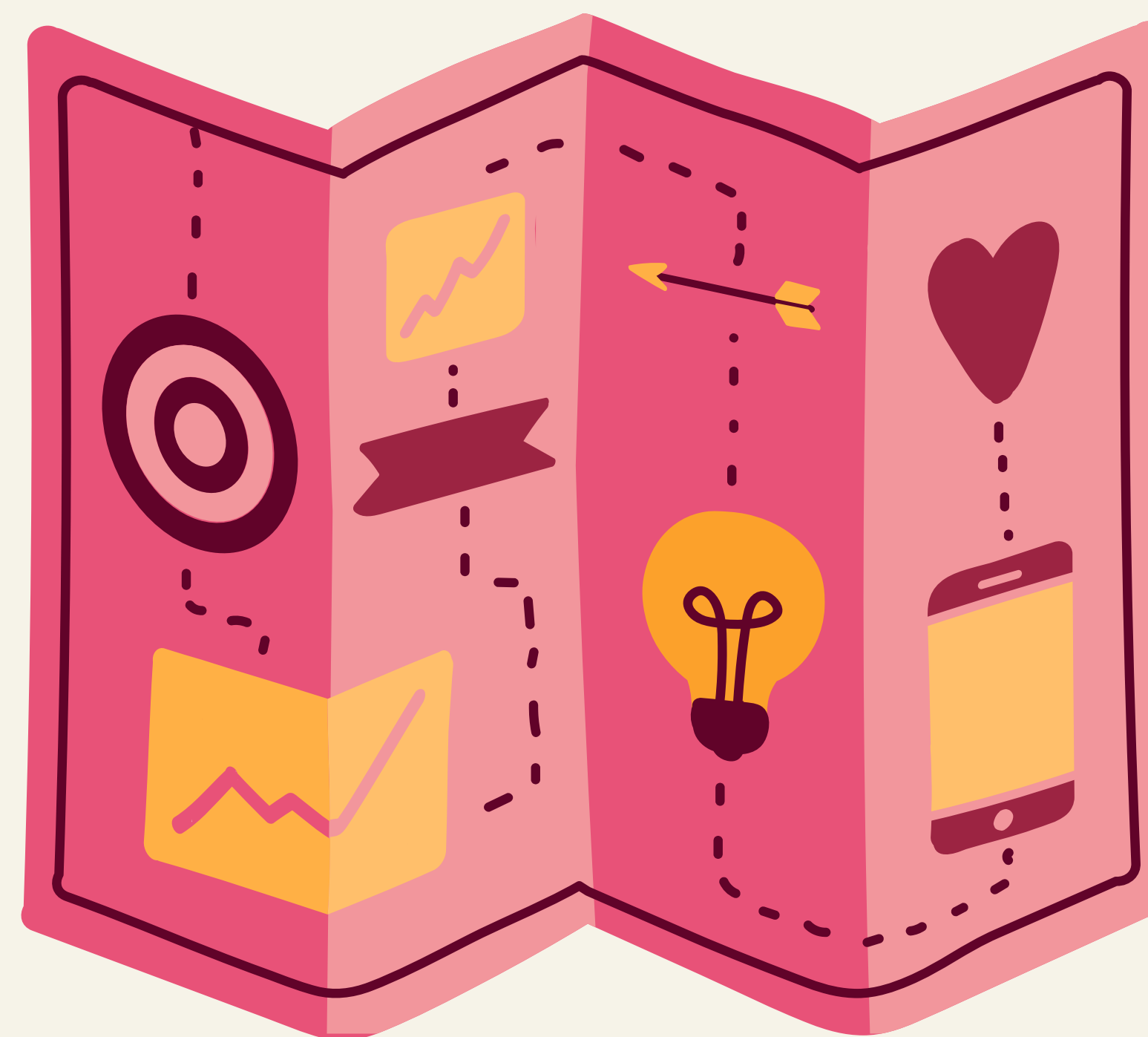
The key is to be flexible and empathetic. There may be circumstances that are wholly out of people's control. It helps to be transparent about this with the entire organization.

Create a workplace conflict management and prevention strategy

How do you create a workplace that prevents and manages conflict effectively?

“There’s no set rule of how to manage conflicts,” says [Lily Kriegs](#), inclusive culture and belonging partner at Stryker.

Whether you’re tackling “regular” workplace conflict challenges or dealing with team members in active conflict zones, keeping the peace in the workplace always comes down to communication and learning the language of positive management and compassion.



Commit to a mission your people believe in

One key to resolving (and avoiding) workplace conflict is having a strong company mission your people believe in. A strong company mission aligns people to common goals, highlights their common ground, and promotes a sense of unity at work—shifting people’s sense of identity from being individuals to being a community.

This approach encourages greater unity and reframes perspectives so that everyone recognizes their shared mission as a team.

You can make supporting colleagues—regardless of personal beliefs—part of your organization’s mission.

Steer clear of hostility and maintain civility

With **171 million acts of incivility per day in American workplaces**, it’s vital to have strategies in place to ensure a civil, safe, and positive workplace culture.

The key is to promote open dialogue while respecting each other’s differences. Encourage conversations to help people understand each other and find common ground rather than convert others to a particular point of view.

Nip conflict debt in the bud

Conflict debt “is the accumulation of conflict over time ... data [has shown] that rather than dealing with [conflicts] head-on, teams have been pushing them to the side and accumulating conflict debt,” says **Jonathan Kirschner**, CEO of AIIR Consulting and AIIR Analytics.

Conflict debt can affect workplace relationships, collaboration, and performance. The way to nip it in the bud? Acknowledge the issues and discuss them openly and civilly.

Set a policy to respect colleagues above all else

Karen Longest says “Setting the tone from the top is paramount. Be neutral, don’t take sides. Be open and transparent. It’s a world of chaos and we’re all impacted by it whether it’s a person we work with or a friend who knows someone.

“We’re not picking sides as a business. We’re supporting everyone we work with and everyone is entitled to their opinion. But, ultimately, we’re a workplace and we need to be respectful and mindful of each other. It’s OK to have discussions as long as you’re cognizant of that.”

It’s important to have guidelines in place that outline your process for managing conflicts. That way, you can ensure you nurture a culture with a strong sense of community where everyone, no matter who they are, feels like they belong.

HiBob’s CPO, **Nirit Peled-Muntz**, says: “Be consistent. Workplaces aren’t democracies.”

Peled-Muntz suggests implementing the following strategies to keep workplaces civil amidst rising tensions:

Incorporate your company values

Make your **company values** clear and establish a policy outlining how everyone can treat each other with respect despite their differences of opinion about work, politics, or anything else.

If people break this policy, set up a disciplinary path:

1. A verbal disciplinary discussion with their manager
2. Another verbal discussion with HR and their manager about how their behavior and words impact their work environment and relationships with team members
3. If the behavior doesn’t change, it could lead to further action, including separation

Leave opinions out of the workplace

“Respect colleagues—be respectful of peers and their work. Care about individuals,” says Peled-Muntz. “We always tell our people you can have your own opinion, but when you come to work, you need to be respectful of your colleagues. We want everyone to care about their colleagues going through a difficult period.”

It’s about supporting everyone you work with. People can have differing views and still co-exist peacefully.

Set expectations

“No matter how open-minded and pro-diversity you are, make it clear that there is zero tolerance for certain things like violence or harassment,” says **Rami Tzafrir**, senior director of OD and L&D at HiBob. “Have clear boundaries and make it clear that if people breach them, there will be disciplinary action taken.”

Have regular training sessions

Provide team members with anti-bias, empathy, and non-aggression training. If you’re a multi-national organization, you can hold training sessions that outline cultural and linguistic differences between international team members to facilitate understanding.

Colleagues who speak English as a second language, for example, may not comprehend all the nuances of the language, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and conflict in globally dispersed teams.

These kinds of training programs can be held annually, or even more frequently, and are important for everyone—especially managers.

Defuse conflicts with diplomatic communication tactics

Disagreements don't always have to be negative. They can spark engaging conversations and bring new ideas and insights to light.

However, conflicts can arise when someone doesn't feel like another person is listening. During an argument, a person may try to interrupt or force their view on the other, which can escalate things quickly.

The key to preventing conflict is having a constructive conversation. This can seem difficult when heated topics arise, but understanding each other's emotional needs and feeling empathy toward each other can stop emotional storms from brewing.

Active listening can help with this. In this method, the listener maintains eye contact and paraphrases what the speaker says to understand the other person.

Dialogic listening is another effective approach. In this approach, participants focus on the conversation itself as a means of learning and forging a connection with the other person rather than sowing the seeds of division.

Encouraging practices that promote **empathic understanding** leads to greater collaboration and boosts satisfaction and company performance.

The key is in the culture

There's no denying that disagreements, politics, and wars will spill over into the workplace.

There are no hard and fast rules. Every process is going to be different for each organization—it's up to you to decide how to approach conflict management and resolution in your workplace.

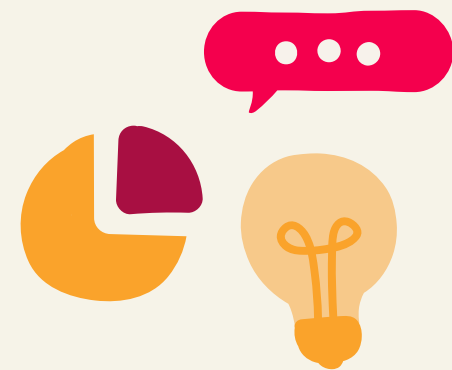
Clear guidelines and a culture of tolerance and empathy are the cornerstones of conflict management and prevention. Cultures of empathy help ensure a healthy environment for everyone at work no matter where they live and no matter what their opinions may be.

Clear guidelines and a culture of tolerance and empathy are essential to preventing and managing conflict. This promotes a healthy environment where everyone feels like they belong, including team members living in active conflict zones who may need additional support—and others who may have conflicting opinions.

Meet Bob

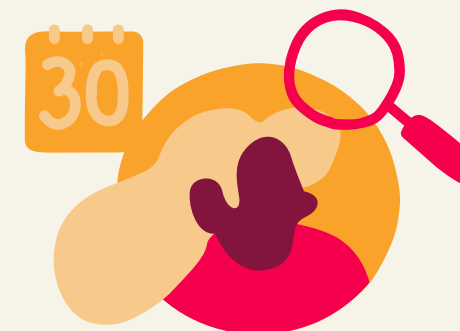
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