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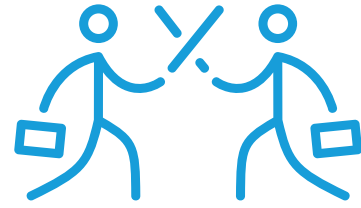
When Travel Policy Turns Into Travel Politics

45 Top Tips
To Help You
Deal With
Conflict
At Work



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The dynamics of conflict



Most of us instinctively shudder when we think of conflict, we do what we can to avoid it.

Yet, from negotiating airline fares to chasing persistent non-compliers, disagreement is bread and butter for most travel managers.

In this short eGuide we'll take a closer look at some of the typical work conflicts you might be familiar with, and we'll provide some helpful tips on how to resolve them constructively.

Can't we all just get along?

The answer to that question is a short no. People's behaviour occurs for a purpose and that purpose usually involves satisfying one or more of the following universal needs:

- Belonging: our need to feel accepted, to get attention and to feel supported
- Feeling significant: our desire to feel special, unique, important and needed
- Self-protection: our need to protect our integrity, personal worth and/or well-being

Conflict often starts when someone perceives there's a threat to one or more of those needs. This can lead to a cycle of often obstructive behaviours which they believe will protect them or restore their sense of belonging and significance.

Conflict isn't always bad of course. When handled correctly, it can lead to very creative problem solving and it encourages us to set personal boundaries.

Ignorance isn't bliss

At work we often express disagreement in a way that's more coded and less brutal than we would with loved ones, or even with complete strangers. This political correctness is of course positive, but it can also stop us from decisively confronting problems at work.

Bear in mind that leaving conflict unresolved is never a good option. It might lead you to lose the respect of your team, your travellers, your suppliers and even your board.

Worse even, you may start internalising some of that unexpressed resentment by going into self-blaming mode. In fact, research shows that unresolved work conflicts are one of the main causes of stress-related problems and can have a very damaging impact on your mental health.

Coping strategies



Fight, flight or freeze

When confronted with conflict our brain gets flooded with a cocktail of stress hormones which typically cause us to either fight, flight or freeze. All three reactions are an evolutionary leftover from days when humans were much lower down the food pecking order.

For thousands of years this fight, flight or freeze reactions offered us our best chance of survival when confronted with the hot-headed caveman next door or the saber-tooth tiger looking for its next meal. But when settling a dispute with an airline supplier or with your HR Director, none of them are particularly adequate.

Unfortunately, most of our modern day responses to disagreement haven't actually evolved much since prehistoric times. Generally speaking they still fall into one of the three behaviours below.

Aggressive behaviour

By acting aggressively and setting yourself above and in front of other people, you may well get what you want. You might use sarcasm, shout or even swear to put pressure on your colleagues.

In the short term, you're on top of the tree and nobody gets to push you around. But the long term impact of persistent aggressive behaviour means you live in a constant state of confrontation. Your relationships with colleagues and loved ones become sour, and this can lead to loneliness and isolation.

Passive behaviour

Consistently taking the 'easy' route by giving in can rapidly become your default response. After all, it's simple and effortless.

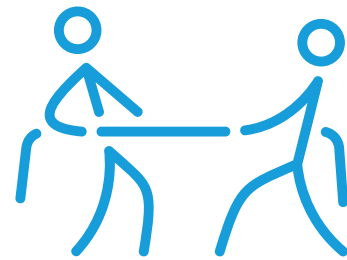
People might see you as easy going and agreeable. But in the long term you could find yourself becoming resentful of your colleagues. You can lose your self-esteem and your confidence. The people around you start to feel sorry for you and may start taking advantage.

Passive aggressive behaviour

You might demonstrate this type of behaviour when you want to get their own way, but lack the self-confidence or self-esteem to ask for it. It works by manipulating others to feel embarrassed or guilty into getting what you want.

Sulking and shaming others into doing what you want might well work in the short term. But do it too often and you might find yourself permanently victimised, a state which hardly does wonders for your self-esteem. Although you might get the sympathy vote to start with, this more than likely will turn into resentment from everyone around you.

Assertiveness, the art of disagreeing like a pro



Even though all three natural coping mechanisms are perfectly valid reactions to disagreement, there's a fourth response which is far more likely to be effective in any type of disagreement. It's called assertiveness.

When you respond in an assertive way, you say what you feel and what you think in an open, honest and direct way. You own what you say or write, and you stand up for what you feel and think, but not at the expense of others. It works through negotiation and reaching workable compromises.

But being assertive doesn't come natural to anyone. After all, it's not part of our instinctive fight, flight or freeze repertoire. It is *learned* behaviour. This means that the only difference between you and someone you consider to more assertive than you, is that perhaps they started learning and practising it a little earlier than you did.

Being assertive at work

It's never too late to learn assertiveness techniques. Below we'll illustrate with a couple of real life case studies how you can be make negotiation and assertiveness a key component in your day-to-day dealings with management, TMC, travellers and your team.

Conflicts with management



My relationship with senior management feels distant

Sonja's relationship with senior management is more distant than she'd like it to be. The day-to-day pressures of her role means she finds it difficult to create the strategic influence she knows she's capable of.

She's frustrated at the lack of understanding and realism from both her Finance Director and her HR Director about what she can deliver in terms of cost savings, policy compliance and data. She often feels caught between the two and hates being put on the spot by either.

Tips:

- Be affirming. Remind yourself you were hired for your strategic skills as well your operational skills.
- Remember that sometimes we know what we're doing, and sometimes we don't. This applies to you as well as your directors, so be kind to yourself.
- Don't be tempted to use roundabout ways to say how you feel. Instead use 'I' statements to own what you say. 'I' statements are about being able to say what 'I want' and what 'I need'.
- When speaking to your colleagues, use positive statements such as: *'Tell me how you feel about this situation. I'll tell you how I feel and then we'll come to some form of way forward',* or; *'We have two differing views on this. How are we going to sort this out?'* *'I would like you to...'* or *'I want...'*
- Increase your visibility within your organisation. Be proactive in meeting with different business units to discuss their travel needs.
- Immerse yourself in your organisation's values and its operational priorities. This will help you prepare for any possible conflicts way before any data reporting crunch points.

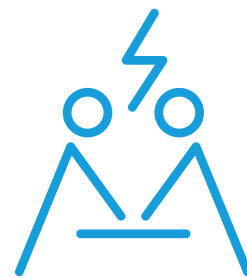
I'm being micromanaged

Erik has been in his role for more than two years. He knows he's competent but feels he's being micromanaged by John who's in charge of the company's purchasing policy. John's very much an *ideas person* who likes to leave the implementation of those ideas to Erik. Although Erik genuinely wants to be cooperative, he feels he's already at full capacity and can't take on any more projects.

Tips:

- Remember that nobody can do to you what you refuse to have done. Another person can't take away your power, unless you give it to them.
- Remind yourself that you can indeed give a simple 'no' to requests. It's neither rude nor unfair.
- Saying no works better than making excuses. If you make excuses, people will still feel free to make the same requests in future.
- Take some of your power back by coming up with constructive ways in which you yourself can work better with your manager. For example, micromanagers don't like surprises, so be more proactive in your updates.
- Provide your manager with valid and supportive feedback on how you feel you're being managed. Be friendly and upfront, and remember to be critical of the behaviour, rather than the person.
- Use empowering and constructive phrases such as *'When you ask me to do xx without checking in with me first, I feel like xx. Instead, I propose we do xx from now on. How does that sound?'*

Conflicts with travellers



I'm dealing with a serial offender

Mohammed is starting to take one of his most prolific business travellers' persistent non-compliance a little personal. Despite the number of carrots provided by the booking system, this traveller is having none of it. Mohammed's suspects this may be a rather passive-aggressive way of communicating that she doesn't agree with the company's travel policy. Mohammed is under significant pressure from both HR and his Finance Manager to minimise out of policy bookings.

Tips:

- Always give your traveller the benefit of the doubt to begin with. Explain your policy and don't just assume they already know.
- Use the 'broken record' technique in which you keep repeating your point until the other person recognises or acknowledges what you're saying. Consistency is key if you want your policy to be taken seriously.
- Avoid using statements like '*you always...*' or '*you never...*' Not only is it often easy for your traveller to dispel this type of generalising statement, it often also acts as an emotional red rag.
- Be specific about what it is you want your traveller to do. Stand your ground and don't lose your temper. Make clear you've recognised what they had to say and then repeat your request.
- Speak to relevant colleagues including HR and Finance about possible sanctions.
- Consider sanctions such as compulsory information sessions for repeat offenders, written warnings, or naming and shaming by circulating a repeat offender list.
- Be prepared to enforce those sanctions. Most importantly, be consistent in your enforcement.

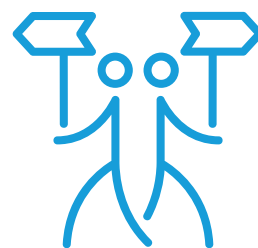
Angry customers

Lots of things can and do go wrong in business travel. Most of it is unintentional and some of it is unavoidable. Jenny is used to being on the receiving end of the occasional angry call from a tired business traveller. She doesn't mind dealing with those calls because she appreciates the feedback. Having said that, the way Sales Director Dan is currently talking at her on the phone just doesn't feel right. Perhaps it's work pressure, stress, loneliness and the guilt of being away from his family, but he comes across as very aggressive and condescending.

Tips:

- Avoid the fight or flight response when the going gets tough. Remind yourself you can handle the call and you can handle it well.
- Allow people to speak their mind and let them run out of steam. Genuinely give them the opportunity to vent their anger first. It will allow them to calm down.
- You're not a punch bag. If you feel the person is overstepping your boundaries or is rude, politely say so and inform them you'll end the conversation unless they tone down.
- Ask yourself how you might respond if you were in a similar situation. Be empathic by showing you understand their concerns. Understanding doesn't necessarily mean you agree with them.
- Use verbal softeners such as *'likely'*, *'possibly'*, *'occasionally'*, *'perhaps'*, *'I wonder if'*, or *'typically'* in your conversation. They create an environment for agreement and cooperation.
- Always try and find something in the conversation that both you and your traveller can agree on.
- Use silences. When your traveller pauses use this as an opportunity to summarise their main point and work together on a solution.

Conflict with my travel management company (TMC)



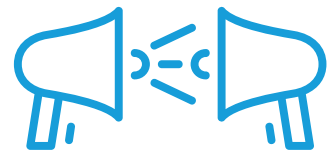
My expectations aren't being met

Vanessa had high hopes when she hired a new TMC to look after both her travel and meeting programmes. Six months in she's having second thoughts, feeling that the service isn't half as good as she hoped for when she joined up. There have been some glaring errors in the data reporting she's received back, and because of ongoing issues with the booking system more and more travellers are turning their backs on it.

Tips:

- Begin by identifying the mistakes that were made. Also acknowledge any errors that have been made on your side.
- Get all the facts down before letting your emotions run any form of communication. Look at the contract. What does it say about deliverables? Involve senior management on both sides if the situation calls for it.
- When talking face-to-face, meet eye-to-eye and on the same level if you want the conversation to be amicable, or place yourself at a slightly higher level than the other person if you're making a demand.
- Whether speaking on the phone or face-to-face, practise keeping your voice at a low pitch and volume. It'll help you exude more confidence.
- Be absolutely clear and specific on what you want done. Say how you feel. Explain why you want it done and how it fits in. Then follow with *'what we're going to do next is xxx'*.
- Avoid undercutting yourself and negating what you're asking for by using stop phrases such as *'I'm sorry to ask you but...'* or *'Sorry to be so blunt, but...'*. Instead, say what you really want, and say it firmly and clearly.

Conflicts within your team



Conflict in meetings

Funmi dreads leading her bi-weekly team meeting. She's in a charge of small team of people who are extremely capable but with egos to match. It happens very rarely that overt arguments take place in those meetings and when they do she's able to put a stop to them very quickly. But Funmi is never quite sure whether and how to handle the less overt conflicts in those meetings, especially the sometimes sarcastic and disrespectful tone from her team members towards each other.

Tips:

- If you're aware that conflict is likely to arise, always start a meeting by stating some clear rules, such as raising one's hand before speaking.
- Invite everyone to contribute during the meeting so that one person does not dominate.
- Keep an eye out for early non-verbal signs of disagreement, facial expressions, eye rolls, body language, staring, whispering or notes being passed down.
- If you spot the early signs of disagreement, invite the attendee to make their point as soon as possible.
- Depersonalise the situation by inviting the focus on *what* is being said, rather than *who* is saying it.
- Ask questions that allow your attendees to identify the objective reasons why they disagree with a point of view or decision. By doing this, you'll guide people back to rational thinking.
- Take things offline, particularly if the conflict appears personal. Arrange a specific meeting to discuss the issue later on.

Dealing with big egos

Jason is part of a small team of four. He loves working in his company but since fellow travel manager Marc joined his team he's been looking for a way out. Marc has a tendency to take over every discussion and grabbing the spotlight. In the beginning he could see past it and thought Marc's behaviour was entertaining and harmless. But now that on three separate occasions Marc's claimed credit for improvements which were put in motion way before he even joined, Jason's had enough of Marc's ego.

Tips:

- Don't allow big egos to 'bait' you in a conversation. You probably won't win the battle and it will make you look bad for trying. Ease the situation by letting them exhaust themselves and run out of steam.
- Use their first names in the conversation but not too often. When applied in a subtle way this is a great technique for taking command and control of a conversation.
- Accept that confidence isn't necessarily a trait. Find out why their behaviour is emotionally triggering you. Could it be that you're projecting your own lack of confidence?
- Speak your mind, but before you do make you prepare a solid counter-argument. Focus on discussing the argument at hand, not the person's character or behaviour.
- Be sensitive and compassionate. Remember that having a big ego can be a sign of deep underlying insecurity.
- If you're a manager, think of changing the team dynamic. Force cooperation by putting the egotist in situations which require working together with others. Or think of ways to reward teamwork instead of individual performance.

Conclusion

Conflict at work is inevitable when you're travel manager. For most of us, our natural response is to avoid it. Although that can be a useful strategy in the short term, over time it undermines our confidence.

Being assertive means bringing awareness to whatever your wants and your needs are in a particular situation. It means recognising those needs are as valid as anybody else's. No more valid, but certainly also no less. Being assertive means you then communicate those needs in a way that encourages negotiation and cooperation, rather than further conflict.

Don't worry if being assertive doesn't come natural to you. For most people it takes ongoing practice, and we hope this guide will encourage you to use future disagreements as an opportunity to further improve this key life skill.

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