

# Reducing Conflict 71 Impending Conflict

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If you know what to look for you can spot the signs of impending conflict. That skill is helpful because you may be able to prevent open conflict from erupting. This article looks at several signs of possible conflict and offers some ideas on how to react to them.

### **Signs of becoming fed up**

Watch the body language of individuals. When they start moving their arms more than usual, it is a good sign that an argument is coming. You may also notice a clenched jaw. Look for a pronounced bulge of the jaw muscle. Also, a furrowed brow will signal displeasure and likely some impending conflict.

If you can get the other person to verbalize his or her feelings it may have the impact of letting frustration out and avoiding direct conflict. Say something like, "You look a little upset, is anything bugging you?" Recognize that the question may potentially annoy the person further. Be alert to that possibility and back off if the person does not want to talk.

### **Pointing can mean impending conflict**

Pointing is a very hostile form of body language. If you see two people in a heated discussion and pointing at each other, that is a dead giveaway. Intervene and see if you can get the individuals to talk about the issues. If someone is addressing you and doing a lot of pointing, you need to calm the person down. Use mediation techniques to find out what is bugging the individual.

### **Talking at the same time**

When conflict is near, people tend to talk over each other. Obviously when you are talking you cannot listen well. Try to get the individuals to slow down and listen carefully to the other person. Sometimes reversing the roles can be useful here. If you can state the other person's point of view accurately, then you have listened well.

### **People avoiding each other**

You know conflict is near when people refuse to be in the same room as their opponent. It can get so extreme that when one person enters a room another person gets up and walks out. If you see that kind of behavior you need to intervene soon because the

situation has become acute. Often the impending conflict is a group-based phenomenon.

### **Cliques forming**

Conflict between groups is very common in most organizations. Look for cliques of three or more people circling the wagons on a specific issue. You may notice a lot of “we versus they” type of language being used. This symptom is especially evident in email notes. It might look like this, “we wanted to re-check the parts, but they assumed the parts were good.”

Work to reduce conflict between the groups. Often it helps to remind them that at the next higher level they are on the same team.

### **Higher than normal stress**

When conflict is present, people are expending significant energy trying to win the day or maybe just protect themselves. If the conflict is prolonged, it really saps the energy of the groups. In this case, it often helps to mix a little fun into the equation. Give people a mental break, away from the constant mind-numbing posturing. You might try doing some short form of exercise or breathing practice if the people are up to it. Don't force anything, but offer some ideas to consider.

### **Low trust**

When people are in conflict, a root cause is often a lack of trust. You might test for this with a trust survey or some coaching on how to build higher trust. There are numerous techniques to raise the trust level between people. You might suggest to work some of the methods into your next meeting.

### **Summary**

Conflict within groups is a fact of life. Recognize that people who are annoyed will have different reactions to suggested ways to help. Be alert for signs that your efforts to help may be increasing the conflict. You may be able to overt some of the dysfunctional behaviors.

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