

7 Strategies for Handling & Resolving Conflicts With Clients

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If you were one to relish conflict, you'd probably have chosen a different career path – one where you could charge clients in 15-minute increments and demand a higher billable rate.

Yet it's impossible to completely avoid tough situations. Conflict is the direct result of two groups having disparate versions of success -- a natural thing as two businesses work with one another. It also easily occurs when communication is unclear, processes are unfamiliar, changes happen quickly, and expectations are misaligned.

For an agency, business conflict management is key. 16% of agency businesses face client retention problems due to proper conflict management strategies in place. Agencies and their clients have to deal with disagreements during a relationship, especially in the beginning as the teams are learning about one another and the partnerships is unproven. This is compounded by the fact that clients, naturally, want to achieve the best results at the lowest price, and the hourly rate structure of agencies is set up to encourage the opposite approach.

According to the [Marketing Agency Growth Report 2018](#), even when an agency has the right talent in place, only 50% of agencies structure their companies in a way that encourages career growth. This is a red flag that signals agencies' risk of losing talent to other agencies or to other industries thereby reducing their daily productivity and disconnect with their clients. One way to bypass some of this disconnect is with an [effective onboarding process](#) to identify all intentions and expectations, but does not circumvent all possible points of contention.

But conflict doesn't have to be negative. Expertly navigating conflict can actually result in more trusting and honest relationships and improved collaboration and productivity. A [study by VitalSmarts](#) found that employees waste \$1,500 per eight-hour workday for every conversation they avoid. And to [get a coveted referral](#), the key is to have open, understanding conversations that create an appealing environment where all parties will want to work together.

Handling conflict in the right way will allow you to get to the core issue more quickly and with a better end result, helping you to salvage the relationships that matter and end those before they ruin your reputation. It's also a valuable opportunity for both sides to consider and state what really matters to them and refocus on that.

The Styles of Conflict Management

According to the [Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument](#) (TKI), there are five styles of handling conflict. An understanding of the five styles should be used to plan an approach to a

difficult conversation or meeting, or it can be used to understand the other party's position and approach.

5 Approaches to Conflict Management

- [Competing](#)
- [Collaborating](#)
- [Compromising](#)
- [Avoiding](#)
- [Accomodating](#)

1) Competing

Under this style, you disregard the wants of the other person and aggressively pursue your goal. This should only be used if there is little hope of salvaging the relationship or an immediate action or conclusion to the situation is needed.

2) Collaborating

In this mode, you are both assertive and cooperative, working to find a solution that satisfies both teams.

3) Compromising

In the compromising approach, you know that neither you nor the client will be completely happy at the resolution of the issue. Your main goal is to find a solution that partly satisfies both sides. You each need to give a little. These conflict resolutions are more complex, requiring both sides to reveal what they care about and to trust the other person.

4) Avoiding

This approach to conflict is all too common. You simply avoid the issue, hoping that you won't have to deal with it. Sometimes it works to avoid problems that will eventually resolve themselves. But in most cases, this is not a long-term solution as these problems reappear, uglier than ever.

5) Accommodating

In the accommodating mode, you work to solve the resolution and are so focused on the other person's needs or solving the problem that you end up working against your own objectives.

It's also useful to consider how much power you have in this situation. Is it more or less than the other party? What are you willing to lose in the conflict situation? Know this before you start the resolution process.

Techniques for Handling & Resolving a Client Conflict Productively

Knowing how to handle and resolve conflict will make your agency an ideal place to work with. Having strategies to reduce conflict with your agency will produce greater satisfaction among clients and employees.

When people have different priorities, incentives, and ways of working, it's natural for conflict to occur, so identifying [which type of client you are working with will help determine how to productively interact with them](#). Accepting this fact is the first step. Next, you need to be able to appreciate conflict as a way to improve communication and the end work product. Once you have adopted this mindset, consider these strategies for handling & resolving conflicts with clients.

Strategies for Handling & Resolving Conflicts with Clients

- [Determine if the problem is worth discussing](#)
- [Use the right body language](#)
- [Focus on the facts not on personal opinions](#)
- [Allow everyone to speak](#)
- [Be mindful about language](#)
- [Refocus the client on the impact](#)
- [Approach the problem with empathy](#)

1) Determine if the problem is worth discussing

I'm not advocating that you avoid problems, but there are some issues not worth mentioning -- the emotional energy and professional time it would take to address and resolve it is disproportionate to its negative impact on your team.

Many people fear conflict and try to avoid it at all costs. By bringing up an issue, you may spur feelings of discomfort and defensiveness in the other person. Be prepared for things to be repaired or for resentments to form.

2) Use the right body language

The way you are sitting, your facial expressions, and your verbal tone provide a lot of information to the person on the other side of the table about your approach to solving the problem, no matter what you are saying.

This is an [often-cited statistic](#), but it is worth revisiting: Only 7% of a message is conveyed through words, while 38% is communicated through vocal elements and 55% through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and posture.

If the person's body language is positive and shows openness, you will want to mirror their posture and position. Refrain from crossing your arms as this tends to indicate aggression or

your part. Try to sit close to the person to show your willingness to collaborate and communicate.

3) Focus on the facts not personal opinions

It can be easy to be blinded by your personal opinions of the person on the other end of the disagreement, but when addressing an issue or dealing with frustrations and other emotions, focus on the issue. Start the conversation by outlining the facts -- the who, what, where, when, why, and how -- and remain objective. If the situation warrants bringing up emotional implications, use phrases such as "I feel ..." or "When you did X, it caused me to feel X ...".

4) Allow everyone to speak

Clients that leave their agencies often complain of not feeling heard. They may have expressed a need or emphasized a problem, but the agency staff members either downplayed the importance of the issue or it was never brought to the attention of the right leaders.

If you've already identified an issue and are working to solve the conflict, be sure to allow the client to fully express her feelings and thoughts. Give her the forum and the time to detail what happened and how she felt. Ask open-ended questions that are non-judgmental. Don't jump into defending why your team did one thing or another. Most likely, that's not even important at this point. For some, it's enough to just know that their concerns have been voiced, and they have been heard.

5) Be mindful about language

Specific words can prompt people to become defensive or to question your motives for highlighting a problem. When you are having a disagreement with a client, use "and" instead of "but". For example: "You want us to have the project done by Friday, and our team is already under a deadline for another project. I'm worried about how to resolve these two things."

By phrasing it this way, your client can begin to see your struggle and the decision you have to make. It won't always solve the immediate issue, but it could spur the client to consider your point of view during conversations.

6) Refocus the client on the impact

Sometimes people can become so blinded by missteps that they lose focus -- they forget the end goal. While it's obviously not ideal that a key deadline was missed or that the account manager failed to ask for a key piece of information, in the end, these two things have had little-to-no impact on the client getting what they really want -- whatever that may be.

Try to refocus the client on what really matters. Apologize and ask if she can move forward. Reestablish your expertise and commitment to achieving the client's objective.

7) Approach the problem with empathy

Only focusing on how a problem negatively impacted your team is the wrong way to approach resolving a conflict. Consider why the client is upset or disappointed in the relationship. Consider the implications for her team or even her job. Try to understand the motivations for the client being difficult.

One way to create empathy in your team and the client's is to prompt everyone to consider a hypothetical situation that allows people to disconnect emotionally from the situation and consider a different perspective. This can put people in a new mindset and make them more willing to work through an issue.