



# EAP SUPERVISOR ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER

February 2024



## DEER OAKS PRESENTS

### Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

#### *Successful Approaches to Difficult Employee Conversations*

Date: Monday, April 29, 2024

Time: 1:00 PM-2:00 PM CST

**REGISTER**

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# KEEPING WORK CONFLICTS CONSTRUCTIVE

If you've ever worked with a team of people, you know that conflict is inevitable. You may not know that conflict can be constructive.

All too often, disagreements among group members aren't resolved in healthy ways. People may leave meetings feeling hurt, misunderstood, or alienated. Conflicts can linger, creating tension and disrupting work. Over time, people may learn to keep their thoughts to themselves, depriving the group of valuable insights and new ideas.

While you can't stop disagreements from happening, you can turn conflicts into positive opportunities. Constructive conflicts can help to strengthen relationships, improve group decisions, and create a more welcoming and motivating work environment.

## How to Keep Conflicts Constructive

Keeping conflicts constructive requires the commitment of all team members, as well as disciplined leadership to call out and stop destructive or hurtful words and behavior. To make conflicts constructive, each team member should follow these guidelines:

- **Express disagreement.** Be open and honest with each other (while remaining respectful; see next guideline):
  - **Speak up.** Share your thoughts and ideas. If you disagree with a decision or with the general approach of the group, say so, and explain why. Staying silent and holding back are both ways to avoid conflict, and they close the door on the potential benefits of constructive conflict.
  - **Group leaders play an important role here.** They need to encourage open forums where disagreements can be freely expressed. If leaders are afraid of opening the door to contrary ideas and constructive conflict, they can't expect much openness and honesty among team members.
- **Be respectful.** As you express disagreement, be aware of how your words might be heard and interpreted by others. Don't make sweeping statements that generalize or categorize people (such as "Men always..." or "Younger people don't..."). Try not to push emotional hot buttons. Consider how you might frame your arguments so that others will listen to you and pay attention to what you are trying to say.

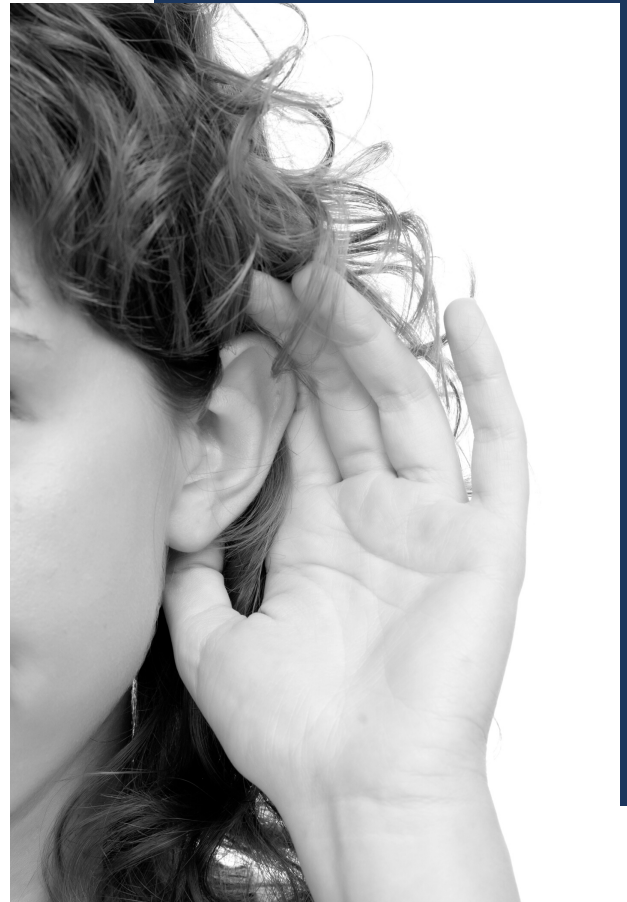


- **Criticize the idea, not the person.** Express your disagreement in a way that doesn't devalue the person with whom you disagree. Focus on the idea or proposal under discussion, not the person who brought it up:
  - Never sink to personal attacks or name-calling, which can have toxic and long-lasting effects on trust and respect among colleagues.
  - If a conflict degenerates into personal attacks, you need to interrupt the conversation, point out that such behavior is counterproductive, and ask people to restate their disagreements by focusing on the issues. This will set a precedent for future discussions.
  - Over time and with practice, group members will learn to express their disagreements openly and respectfully, and people will speak up because they'll feel safe from verbal attacks.

- **Don't be defensive.** When it's your idea that's being criticized, listen with an open mind. Suppress the natural urge to be defensive. This can be a difficult skill to master. People don't like to be told they're wrong:
  - If you think someone's criticism misses the point of what you were saying, ask them to summarize your main points. This allows both of you to identify possible misunderstandings and clarify your positions. By asking questions of those who disagree with you, new ideas and suggestions get thrown into conversations. These may lead to creative solutions that haven't been considered.
  - If your idea eventually falls flat—so what? By inviting discussions, you've moved the processes forward in positive ways that defensive reactions could never have accomplished.
- **Focus on one issue at a time.** If, while discussing a point of disagreement, another issue is raised, table it for discussion after the first issue is resolved. Don't let yourself and your team be drawn into an expanding conflict over multiple issues at once.
- **Learn to calm yourself.** If you feel yourself getting overly emotional during the discussion of an issue, calm yourself or ask for a break. Expressing heated emotions won't help you get to a constructive resolution of the conflict. Pay attention to your emotions as clues to what's important to you, but find ways to explain your thoughts and opinions calmly.

You can make conflicts work for your team, but it takes a commitment from all group members. Each person must agree to honestly state disagreements in a sensitive manner that focuses on the ideas, not the people. Approached in this way, conflicts can be one of your team's greatest assets.

*Source: Morgan, H. (2023, December 21). Keeping work conflicts constructive (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO).*



## LISTENING TO PARAPHRASE

Paraphrasing lets the other person know you are trying to understand his or her problem. This communication tool also clarifies communication, slows the pace of interaction, reduces emotional intensity, helps elicit more information, and enhances your analysis of the situation. Paraphrasing may also help focus the other person on the problem and reduce repetition.

### **Paraphrasing = Lead-In + Restating Content and Feelings**

The purpose of a lead-in is to assure the other person that you are not trying to tell him or her how they are feeling. You are simply checking your understanding of the problems and affirming his or her feelings. In the process, you may help the person organize his or her thoughts and identify the real problem.

Use a variety of lead-ins such as these:

- "I wonder if..."
- "Could it be that...?"
- "It sounds like..."
- "It seems like..."
- "I gather that..."
- "Is it correct to say...?"
- "As I hear it..."
- "You appear to be..."
- "I guess that..."

The other person's needs are often very basic (e.g. respect, security, recognition) and those feelings can be brought to light both verbally and nonverbally:

- First, listen for and paraphrase feelings (e.g. anger, sadness, happiness, fear).
- Next, choose a word or phrase that describes the exact feeling and level of intensity.
- Remember that anger frequently covers fear, pain, and powerlessness.

When the intense emotions begin to subside, you can then switch to paraphrasing the factual content of the other person's message.

### **Paraphrasing = Stating in Your Own Words What the Other Said**

- Focus on the speaker: "So you believe strongly..."
- Include facts and feelings: "You were very unhappy when she..."
- Be brief: "The way you see it is..."

Again, paraphrasing lets the other person know you are trying to understand, clarifies communication, slows the pace of interaction, reduces intensity, helps elicit more information, and facilitates assessment of the situation.

### **Cautions**

- Do not make evaluations or judgments.
- Avoid stereotyped responses.
- Be careful about timing.
- Be careful about overstating.

### **Practicing paraphrasing: Write out the way you would verbally paraphrase the following statements.**

Our committee has been meeting every week now for two months. No matter what the proposal or idea expressed, Bob acts like a wet blanket. We only have one more month to complete the plan and implement it. We're running out of time. All he says is, "No, I don't think it is practical," or, "No, we don't have enough money," or, "No, we need more information." We're getting nowhere fast. The rest of us feel like resigning from the committee.

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"You just don't understand what it's like to have to sit through staff meetings like the one we had today! I don't feel I can be attentive because I am so upset. At times I felt like getting up and leaving."

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"No! That's not what I said. That is not what I want. If no one cares about my opinion and feelings, maybe I should leave this department. Maybe I'm the oddball here, and you all would be happier if I weren't around."

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Source: U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, *Alternative Dispute Resolution*. (Updated 2015, August 15). Listening to paraphrase. Retrieved September 12, 2019, from <http://www.va.gov>

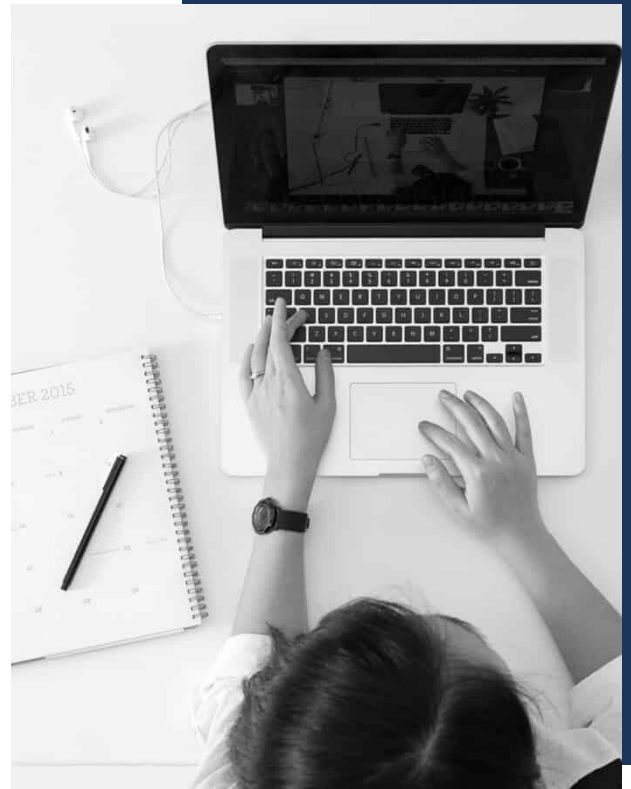
# ASK YOUR EAP!

**Q. Conflict resolution is a crucial skill for supervisors. Can you offer a checklist of steps?**

A. Hundreds of resources exist to help you acquire conflict resolution skills. Here's a checklist: 1) Recognize that a conflict exists. 2) Gather information separately from parties to the conflict. 3) Determine what you believe is the root cause of the conflict. 4) Stay neutral. Don't take a side. 5) As the supervisor, plainly describe the goal to the employees in conflict: finding a mutually satisfying solution (while fixing or improving the relationship between the employees). 6) Create a respectful place for the involved parties to express themselves without fear of judgment. 7) Explore a way to find common ground. 8) Brainstorm solutions. 9) Evaluate and select solutions. 10) Agree to a timeline for implementing the solution, including steps, dates, and who does what. 11) Agree on a follow-up and feedback plan to keep the ball rolling. 12) Monitor the solution and team together as needed to modify the final agreement.

**Q. I provided elder care support to my mother for years. It was very stressful. Two of my employees are now in the same situation, and I can see their productivity slipping. I can refer them to the EAP, of course, but can I also give them advice? I am a "pro" at this whole issue.**

A. If your employees' performance is affected, it is appropriate to speak with each of them separately to address the decline and get it corrected. During these discussions, it's likely they will share information about the difficult situation of taking care of an elderly parent. Your experience and any tips you can offer may prove invaluable, but you should also mention the EAP because of the abundance of resources the program may be able to offer. Offering a few tips from your experience is appropriate, and should not undermine use of the EAP, but what if their performance does not improve? In this case, follow up and reinforce the need to work with the EAP. Don't ignore the lack of improved performance. If the situation gets worse, consult with the EAP if needed and arrange a formal referral. Although initially this problem appears straightforward, highly complex issues can still underlie the performance issues.



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