

## HOW CAN POSITIVE CONFLICT LEAD TO POSITIVE EMPLOYEE RELATIONS?



## Can Positive Conflict Lead to Positive Employee Relations?

Tagged with: [Employee Communication](#), [Positive Employee Relations](#)

It sounds counter-intuitive, but there is such a thing as positive conflict. Conflict is a normal and inevitable part of people interacting, and there are many [causes of conflict](#). The word "conflict" often has a negative connotation, like labor union vs. management or management vs. employees or one group of employees letting bias drive their behaviors towards another group. However, the concept of conflict is deeper than just arguing over a particular matter, like how to complete work or whether a company should [stay union-free](#). For example, it can be a conflict of ideas, with one side promoting more opportunities or new product ideas. It can also be a path to stronger employee engagement by creating a more inclusive work environment and better employee relationships.

Projections, along with our partners at A Better Leader, has years of experience helping workplaces overcome struggles with employee engagement, retention, finding a healthy [work-life balance](#), and even [conflict resolution](#) in their organizations. By focusing on effective communication and [empowering leaders with the knowledge](#) and confidence they need, we help employers and HR professionals move organizations forward and reinforce the power of a positive workplace.

### Overcoming Conditioning

Many conflicts and the responses to disagreement are based on culture. In American workplace culture, saying something like, "I don't agree" is frequently treated as a rude remark and an invitation to feel resentment. People like to avoid

conflict so appear to agree, only to foment discord at a later date. Management holds a meeting to discuss the reasons the [employees don't need a union](#), and employees don't say anything until after the meeting. Then the pro-union vs. anti-union employee groups disrupt workflows because of their differences of opinion about unions.

It would be better if, during information sessions, employees from each side explained their reasons for their perspectives and hashed out a way to reconcile them, with management being the link. Think of the tremendous value in such a discussion. People hear what others are actually feeling and thinking. They hear the logic behind their opinions, and what they believe it would take to find a meeting of minds. With this kind of information, management has the basis for strengthening [employee engagement](#).

Positive conflict can also promote more [inclusive behavior](#). Unconscious bias is a big topic today because it helps explain why so many diversity and inclusion programs haven't met goals; the reason most women and people of color never make it to the final interview; the lack of diversity in the leadership pipeline; and continued events of [workplace bullying and harassment](#). [Unconscious bias](#) could be called under-the-radar bias, where direct conflict is never apparent. A male interviewer never tells a woman he believes she can't handle the job because she's a wife and mother and won't put in the hours, or a supervisor never tells a Black employee he has no intention of recommending him for a promotion. It's all hush-hush.



## Creative Friction

So what is positive conflict? It is creative friction that [gives people a voice](#) – the opportunity to be authentic. People can share diverse perspectives, present new ideas, pursue innovations, and identify new opportunities. Assume team members disagree on how to implement a new initiative and on how responsibilities are assigned. Unless employees feel comfortable expressing their differing ideas or sharing perspectives, the risk of the initiative failing is much higher. The team members are not going to cooperate with each other. Resentments will likely grow, and there's a good chance the manager will become the target. "She's afraid to tell the team..." or "He's biased, which explains..."

A prior Ohio State University Engineering Career Services staff member, [Rachel Ligman](#), identified the advantages of positive conflict as the following.

- » People consider different ideas
- » Leads to increased participation and more commitment to the goals and decisions of the group
- » Leads to issue clarification and/or reassessment
- » Helps to build cohesiveness because people learn more about each other

## Conflict and Labor Unions

In another example, senior management is afraid to even whisper the words “[labor union](#)” out of fear. It will cause conflict between management and staff and prompt employees to consider union. They don’t have a [union-focused website](#), don’t write posts or send tweets explaining how a local company suffered consequences of unionizing, and don’t make [podcasts](#) explaining the company’s solid reasons for staying union-free. It’s a lot of “don’ts” to avoid conflict. In the meantime, employees are contacting the union. Positive conflict is the open expression of perspectives in which management and employees can discuss the pros and cons of unionizing and ideally conclude that [staying union-free](#) is the best solution through issue clarification.

## Benefits of Positive Conflict

There are other benefits of positive conflict. One is relationships improving. Simmering resentments in a workforce destroy [employee engagement](#). Leaders and staff should work through conflict together, meaning your leaders need to learn the right communication skills.

An element of positive conflict is active listening, or really hearing what the person is saying and understanding what matters to them. Employees need opportunities to have “good” conflict. They can talk about things like the problems the scheduling is causing in their personal lives, their desire for a higher wage, or experiences of microaggressions. Microaggressions are always subtle, verbal, or nonverbal; and directed at members of a marginalized group. They are insidious, and if people are unwilling to talk about them, an employer will eventually be accused of allowing a hostile workplace, leading to [unionization](#). The fight for social justice that took place in the streets in the past year included a belief that people of color continue to be discriminated against in the workplace. Positive conflict can propel [diverse employee inclusion](#) because people are talking.

## Encouraging a Respectful, Innovative Workplace

Positive conflict can also lead to innovation. Think about this for a minute. People experience [interpersonal conflict](#) for many reasons, but basically, they have different perspectives or opinions. Innovation is not born of consensus. It emerges from the debate about points that produces a whole new idea. “That will never work.” “I disagree but explain why you think so.” Saying never and disagree are words of conflict, but they can lead to vigorous discussions that yield valuable information and ideas.

Everyone wants to be liked, including managers. In the book, [Difficult Conversations](#), author and executive coach Joel Garfinkle wrote, “While it’s natural to want to be liked, that’s not always the most important thing.” He says to instead focus on giving and earning respect. Respect is a core value at the heart of [positive employee relations](#) and employee engagement. Respect leads to mutually supportive conversations. Members of an engaged workforce know they can start difficult conversations without them devolving into anger.



## Taking on Conflict

An older article in the Harvard Business Review titled [How to Pick a Good Fight](#) by Saj-Nicole Joni, and Damon Beyer named the three principles for selecting the conflict to take on.

- » Make it material – Only pick issues that have game-changing potential and can motivate employees.
- » Focus on the future – Leaders should spend their time and energy looking ahead and redirect conversations in the workforce to talking about the future. A [future-facing conversation](#) shifts to what could happen focuses people's attention on what is achievable and involves uncertainty.
- » Pursue a noble purpose – Any conflict should be about improving lives, connecting people with a sense of purpose that goes beyond self-interest and unleashes collective abilities.

There are rules of engagement, of course. Joni and Beyer say there must be clear boundaries for behavior. People with dissenting points of view are encouraged to speak up. Additionally, there must be mechanisms in place to keep the debate professional.

All three principles and the rules of engagement apply to [staying union-free](#). Discussing unions with employees is important because of the immense impact of unionizing on employees in the future. There is much uncertainty and certain consequences, and employees need to be fully aware. During the "stay union-free" conversations, management can discuss how the company demonstrates it cares about its employees and their families. In the tech world, airing grievances can take many forms – FAQ on the website, pulse surveys via an app, social media posts, and so on.

## Promoting and Managing Positive Conflict

Following are some tips to promote and manage positive conflict.

- » [Leadership training](#) – Your leaders at all levels must understand the principles of positive conflict so they don't avoid all conflict. Effective leaders have active listening skills and understand what practicing psychologist and author of [Conflict Without Casualties](#), Nate Regier, calls "compassionate accountability." This accountability involves struggling with others through the conflict to reach a solution. Leaders leverage the conflict rather than try to control it. They treat people as people and maintain optimism. Regier identifies three compassion skills to promote positive conflict: [Empathize with others](#). Ask others for their ideas first. Always see things through with integrity and respect, being clear about expectations, and acknowledging mistakes.
- » Staff training – Your employees will experience conflicts among themselves. Maintaining [a respectful workforce](#), harassment training, and bias training are all important to developing a [positive workplace](#) where people don't verbally or non-verbally attack each other or express conscious or unconscious bias, which either causes negative conflict or high turnover of diverse employees. Training staff on positive conflict behaviors can help them avoid negative conflict.
- » Interpersonal communication skills for all organizational members – From the CEO to managers and supervisors to the frontline workers, people need problem-solving, conflict resolution, and general [communication skills](#).
- » [Foster the appropriate culture](#) – The organization's culture is a key determinant of whether conflict can be positive. People need to know they can bring up differences of opinion without fear. Often, the best way to do that is to have

common goals. The focus of your leaders and employees during any conflict should be on achieving common goals instead of on differences of ideas or opinions. Positive conflict positioned as a way to reach goals should be rewarded.

Positive conflict can give employees a voice concerning anything they believe is important. It is a form of communication that is often avoided rather than encouraged. Using conflict productively, according to [Dr. Teresa Tompkins](#), Professor of Applied Behavioral Science at the Pepperdine Graziadio Business School, requires the courage to talk about what people are avoiding; being able to see past initial behaviors in the belief the person embraces the organization's values and goals; common goals that promote a sense of purpose; and transparency by making it possible for organizational members to know what to expect from others.

## Positive Conflict and Positive Employee Relations

[Projections, Inc.](#) focuses on helping organizations develop positive employee relations as the primary strategy for achieving many goals, from [staying union-free](#) to building a culture of transparency and trust to engaging the workforce through [better leadership](#). Empowering people at all organizational levels is made possible through videos, website development, [eLearning](#) interactive programs, and digital tools. The bottom line is that communication effectively drives systems, processes, productivity, and the ability to meet goals.

### About the Author [Jennifer Orechwa](#)

In over 25 years of helping companies connect with their employees, Jennifer has gained a unique perspective on what it takes to build a culture of engagement. By blending a deep understanding of labor and employee relations with powerful digital marketing knowledge, Jennifer has helped thousands of companies achieve behavioral change at a cultural level.

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