

## Handling conflict by Eleanor Hayes

<b>Age:</b>	Adults
<b>Level:</b>	Upper-intermediate
<b>Time:</b>	1 hour 30 minutes
<b>Objectives:</b>	To learn ways of handling workplace conflict; to practise language of negotiation, interactional and transactional language, idioms and conditionals
<b>Key skills:</b>	Speaking, listening
<b>Materials:</b>	One copy of the worksheet per student

### Procedure

1. Warmer – Tell the students to close their eyes and imagine. Read out scenarios 1, 2 and 3 below, pausing after each one to allow students to discuss the image they've formed in their heads with their partner. Any unknown words may need explaining, for example *meter*.

**Scenario 1** – You are a junior employee. Imagine you drive to work and when you arrive, you are no longer allowed to park in the car park because the spaces are for customers and managers only. You drive down the road to the station and find an empty parking space there. You go to the meter to pay. It costs five euros. Then, you walk for five minutes back to work. The same thing happens every day. A lot of your colleagues have the same experience. Now, imagine it is six months later. You go to the meter to pay. The cost is seven euros. How do you feel? Tell your partner.

**Scenario 2** – Now, imagine you are the union representative. Your colleagues have been complaining about this problem to you and you arrange a meeting with the manager to discuss a solution. You go into the meeting. How do you behave? What do you say? Tell your partner.

**Scenario 3** – Imagine you are the manager and a union representative comes to discuss the parking problem with you. They are very angry and shout at you. How do you feel? What do you say? Tell your partner.

2. Ask the class if they have ever been in any similar situations and get them to discuss their answers in pairs. Then, ask them to share their answers in an open class.
3. Hand out the dialogue worksheet. Read out the dialogue while students listen. You may want to ask a strong student to read one of the parts.
4. Write the following statement on the board:

*The manager is very good.*

Have students discuss their responses to this statement, giving reasons.

5. Hand out the final worksheet. Students look at the pictures in exercise 1 and decide which best matches their image of the general manager from the dialogue.
6. Ask students: How does the conversation start?  
Answer: *talking about family*. Explain that this is an example of 'small talk': an informal topic that is often used to start a conversation and build up rapport between people. It is particularly useful when trying to broach a difficult topic.
7. Write the informal phrases below on the board. Have students identify and underline them in the dialogue and then guess the meanings from the context. They should discuss their answers with a partner. Confirm the correct answers.

1. **time flies** – *time seems to be passing very quickly*
2. **little one** – *child*
3. **snowed under** – *having too much work to deal with*
4. **bear in mind** – *remember to consider something when you are thinking about or doing something else*
5. **lead to a strike** – *result in workers refusing to work, as a protest about pay or conditions of work*
6. **first come, first served** – *used for saying that if you arrive before other people, you will receive something and they won't*

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7. **out of pocket** – *having lost money in a transaction*
  8. **a little tweaking** – *some small changes to improve something*
  9. **hectic** – *full of busy activity*
  10. **catch up** – *meet to discuss the latest developments*
8. Students work in pairs to complete exercise 2 on the worksheet. They should re-read the dialogue and find language that serves the various functions in the table. Discuss the answers in the open class.

**Key:** (suggested answers)

function	language
introduce the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How can I help you?</i></li> <li>• <i>I wanted to raise a difficult issue with you ...</i></li> </ul>
give opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I think we should ...</i></li> <li>• <i>I don't think ...</i></li> <li>• <i>You need to bear in mind ...</i></li> </ul>
show politeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Good morning, Tracy ... to ... No problem.</i></li> <li>• <i>Well, not really ...</i></li> <li>• <i>Right. OK, Tracy. Thanks very much.</i></li> <li>• <i>I think that covers everything. Sounds good.</i></li> </ul>
show agreement and calm the situation down	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I take on board your point ...</i></li> <li>• <i>I can see your point of view ...</i></li> <li>• <i>I understand what you are saying.</i></li> <li>• <i>It's worth considering. It might help.</i></li> </ul>
make suggestions and offer solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>think about it ...</i></li> <li>• <i>How about ...?</i></li> <li>• <i>You can't expect ..., surely?</i></li> <li>• <i>What if ...?</i></li> <li>• <i>Say, ...?</i></li> </ul>
close a negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>This has been very helpful.</i></li> <li>• <i>I'll let you get back to work.</i></li> <li>• <i>I'll update you ...</i></li> <li>• <i>I'll catch up with you about this at a later date.</i></li> </ul>

9. Discuss the types of language used and the reasons why it is used. For example:
  - questions help make suggestions;
  - conditionals help support opinions (*'If you continue to keep spaces for managers only, staff will continue to think it is unfair ...'*; *'If we made a contribution, they'd be less out of pocket.'*);
  - interactional talk (e.g. about family) helps soften the conflict.
10. Ask students if negotiating is similar in their country.
11. Students read the dialogue in exercise 3 out with a partner, then change or expand the text, making it politer using the language from exercise 2. You may need to explain the following vocabulary: *wholesalers, mentor system, clear things up*. Pairs can then read their new dialogues out to another pair.
12. Students now compose and practise their own dialogue based on one of the scenarios in exercise 4. Encourage use of the new language from exercise 2.

### Extension activities

- Students come up with their own scenarios that may cause conflict in their own workplace and create a dialogue.
- Students write a letter of complaint about the issue they discussed as a follow-up to their meeting.

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The dialogue below shows the meeting between the General Manager and Union Representative about an issue staff have been having with car parking spaces at the company.

**GM – general manager**

**UR – union representative**

**GM:** Good morning, Tracy. Thanks for coming in to see me. I hope you are well. How's the little one?

**UR:** Good morning, Tom. Thanks for meeting me. I know you're snowed under. Not so little now – he starts school in September.

**GM:** *(smiles)* Ah, time flies, doesn't it? No problem. Take a seat, Tracy. How can I help you?

**UR:** I wanted to raise a difficult issue with you to see if we can find a way forward. As you are aware, the lack of car-parking spaces is causing problems, especially first thing in the morning.

**GM:** Yes, I had heard. I think we should keep plenty of parking spaces for clients and managers. Do you agree?

**UR:** Well, not really Tom. The staff are not happy about keeping spaces for managers. You need to bear in mind that many of our staff arrive early. They don't accept that managers parking is prioritized. If you continue to keep spaces for managers only, staff will continue to think it is unfair and this could lead to a strike. I don't think any of us want that to happen!

**GM:** We need to be realistic, Tracy. We do have a serious problem on our hands and we need to find the best way to resolve this. I take on board your point that this needs to be fair. How about if we keep five spaces for staff on a first come, first served basis and the rest of the staff, including managers, could park their cars in the car park near the station?

**UR:** I can see your point of view but I don't think that the non-managerial workers will see that as a fair solution to the parking problem. That car park is expensive; plus, the cost goes up every six months. Just think about it, Tom – that is the same as the staff taking a pay cut. You can't expect everyone to do that, surely?

**GM:** Mmm. I understand what you are saying. OK. What if we could help towards the cost? Say, thirty per cent? If we made a contribution, they'd be less out of pocket.

**UR:** Maybe ... It's worth considering. It might help. I think fifty-fifty might make staff happier.

**GM:** Right. OK, Tracy. Thanks very much. This has been very helpful. I'll discuss this proposal at the next board meeting. Let's see – just to be clear, I'll suggest that five spaces are kept for staff on a first come, first served basis; that *all* levels of staff park in the public car park and that we'll contribute somewhere between thirty and fifty per cent towards the cost for existing staff. A figure to be confirmed.

**UR:** OK, Tom. I think that covers everything. Sounds good.

**GM:** Good. Hopefully just a little tweaking! Thanks, Tracy. I'll let you get back to work. I know you're very busy with the recent big order. I'll update you once I've been to the board and then meet with you again to finalize things.

**UR:** Thanks, Tom. You're right – it's very hectic at the moment but I like to be busy. I'll catch up with you about this at a later date.

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1. Here are three managers. Which one is closest to the one in the conversation? Discuss with your partner.



2. What language is used for the following functions? Complete the table using language from the dialogue. Some phrases can have more than one function.

function	language
introduce the problem	
give opinions	
show politeness	
show agreement and calm the situation down	
make suggestions and offer solutions	
close a negotiation	

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3. Read the following dialogue. Rewrite it so that it sounds politer, using some of the language from task 2.

**JE – junior employee**

**M – manager**

**JE:** I need to inform you that something happened last week that has made me feel uncomfortable working here.

**M:** Really? What happened?

**JE:** As you know, the other buyers and I went to the wholesalers last week. Ben gave me the role of securing the deal. However, when we were in the meeting with the sellers, he just took over and wouldn't let me speak.

**M:** Ben is my main buyer. You are a junior and must learn from Ben.

**JE:** I'm not happy with the way you run the business.

**M:** Well, we try to have a mentor system. Perhaps there was some miscommunication between you and Ben.

**JE:** Maybe.

**M:** I'll call a meeting with the senior buyers and clear things up.

**JE:** OK.

4. Choose *one* of the following scenarios and write a dialogue, using some of the new language you have learnt.

Student A takes the role of a buyer. Student B takes the role of the supplier. There has been a mistake with an order. Student A tells student B about the mistake.

or

Student A takes the role of the union representative. Student B takes the role of the manager. There is going to be a pay cut for all staff. Student A tells student B that the staff are unhappy.