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Take a No-Crying Approach to Resolving Workplace Conflicts

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"There's no crying in baseball!" screams Tom Hanks as Jimmy Dugan at an outfielder on his all-women's team, shortly after he's brought her to tears for a throwing error in the classic 1992 baseball movie A League of Their Own.

There's no crying in the world of work either, especially when you're just starting out, says career expert Alaina Levine.

"You are the professional, no matter what," says Levine, president of Tucson, Arizona-based Quantum Success Solutions. "That means you're serious about your job, company, organization, department, field and industry, and you act that way. You're a business professional, and it's all business, even when there's a conflict."

By removing your emotions, you'll more clearly see the situation when you're experiencing a conflict with a coworker. Then you can decide what, if anything, you want to do about it.

Pinpoint the Cause

In order to resolve a workplace conflict, try to first understand what it's all about, says Dr. Christine Riordan, associate dean for external relations in Texas Christian University's Neeley School of Business.

"This is often easier said than done," Riordan acknowledges. "But it's an important first step."

A host of potential causes may be in play, Riordan says. Among them: personality differences, your coworker's (or perhaps your) behaviors, value or goal conflicts, differences of opinion or differences in work ethic. Whatever the case, "you need to figure out what is truly causing the conflict with your coworker and fully define the problem in order to determine the solution," Riordan stresses.

You may conclude the conflict is too small to worry about, says management and communication consultant Patti Fralix, author of *How to Thrive in Spite of Mess, Stress and Less*. If so, then let it go. As Fralix puts it: "Don't major in the minors!"

In most cases, though, you'll want to address the conflict before it festers and gets worse. When you do:

- Honestly Examine Your Own Role in the Conflict:** "Sometimes it's easy to think that you're right and the other person is wrong," says Susanne Alexander, coauthor of *College and Career Success Simplified*. But it's quite possible that you simply don't know the whole story. Could you be at the heart of the conflict? Are you sure?
- Determine Your Coworker's Preferred Communication Style:** If you bring up the conflict with your coworker using his preferred communication style instead of your own, you'll be much more likely to succeed in your efforts, says Fralix. So if your coworker is direct, be direct. If he is indirect, be indirect -- "but still clear," Fralix emphasizes. "People hear best in their [own] communication style."
- Use "I" Statements:** "You" statements -- e.g., "You keep interrupting me in meetings" -- will only make your coworker feel as if he is under attack, says Michelle Tillis Lederman, founder of corporate training and coaching company *Executive Essentials*. So stick with "I" statements. Example: "In our meetings together, I often feel I am interrupted. Am I misinterpreting things?"
- Take It Outside:** No, not outside in the context of a parking lot brawl! It does often help, though, to invite your coworker out for lunch or coffee "out of the workplace and into neutral ground where you won't be overheard by others," says Alexander.

Most importantly, think "win-win" instead of just plain "win." Your goal shouldn't be victory as much as

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mutual satisfaction. "You should not approach the situation as someone who is going in to win a fight or an argument," says Riordan. "Rather, go into it as someone who wants to preserve the relationship."

That way, neither one of you will end up crying.

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