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# Resolve Conflict for Better Management

How nudges can reduce the occurrence of workplace conflicts and  
enhance the effectiveness of mediation



# Workplace conflict

Any type of unethical and unfair behaviour that disrupt the efficiency, mental health of employees, and subsequently the growth of the company

It can take many forms, e.g., a single disagreement or argument, verbal abuse, harassment or bullying.

We will not tackle healthy and positive conflict, e.g., healthy competitions



# Conflict is common

1

Employees in United States spend on average, **2.8 hrs/week** in conflict, amounting to **\$359 billion** (CPP, 2008)

2

**38% employees** in UK experience interpersonal workplace conflict per year (CIPD, 2015)



## Conflict is poorly resolved

3

60% employees never received basic conflict management classes or training for conflict resolution in the workplace (CPP, 2008).

4

31% of managers believed they were good at resolving disagreements, whereas only 22% of employee agreed (CPP, 2008) .





**58%** of workers surveyed **have quit a job**—or are considering it—  
**because of disruptive conflict** (CPP, 2008)





# Three Stages of Conflicts (BDA)

## 01 BEFORE



When involvers feel dissatisfied and are contemplating about starting an episode of conflict (e.g., verbal disagreement)

**Improve workplace cooperation**

## 02 DURING

When involvers are engaging in an episode of conflict that has not yet been resolved

**Reduce the duration of the ongoing conflict**

## 03 AFTER

When an episode of the conflict finishes without resolving the underlying issues.

**Promote mediation**



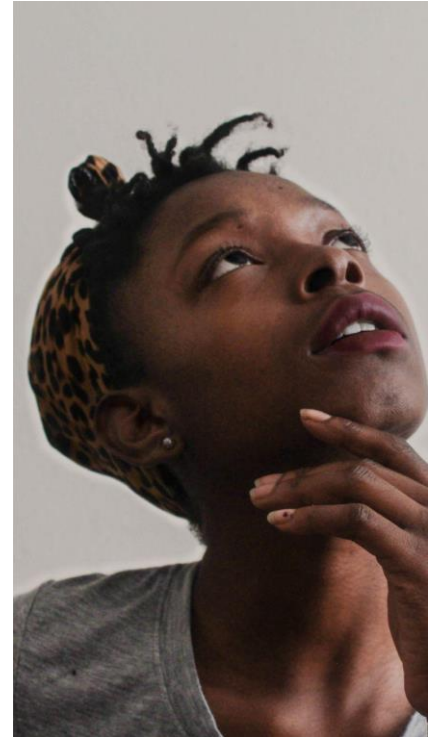
# 01 Intervention **BEFORE** Conflicts

## Workplace Conflict Dilemma

Pair employees to play the Conflict Dilemma quarterly (not display the result of each game individually to avoid revenge) and display the collective result in the form of “**xxx% of you decided to cooperate**” at the front of office, so the nature of cooperation and their past behaviours are salient for long-term effects.

*Due to unknown reasons, you want to have a personal conflict with another colleague who works on the same project. However, the final report for the project is due next week, and now, you and your colleague need to settle with an agreement on cooperation to finish the project. If you decide to cooperate and let go of the personal conflict, both you and your colleague will finish the project effortlessly. If both or any of you decide not to cooperate and start the conflict, the project will likely fail and be miserable. Your colleague is receiving the same sets of instructions.*

*What do you **personally** think is the **morally right thing** to do in this situation?*



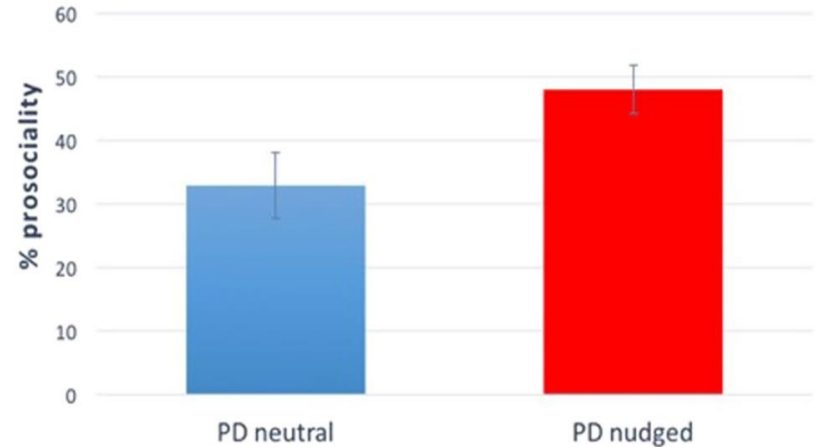
# Capraro et al. (2019)

300 participants given the classic prisoner's dilemma (PD) and were told that cooperation leads to higher earnings if both cooperate by contributing.

Results suggests that *those nudged by moral questions tend to contribute significantly more earnings*

Subsequent experiments with 172 and 537 participants showed that the *increase in prosociality and cooperation persist over sessions and context.*

Those morally questioned are also more likely to cooperate in the subsequent session, and are more likely to donate more in dictator games



# Intervention **DURING** Conflicts

Individuals involved in conflict frequently experiences feeling of anger and fear that impedes the process of resolution (Bar-Tal, 2013; Maoz & McCauley, 2009). Therefore, ***interventions should invest in helping employees to better regulate emotion.***

Cognitive Reappraisal (Gross, 1998) is found to be effective for reducing negative emotion felt during conflict (Halperin et al., 2014). Reappraisal works by ***asking individuals to reinterpret and reframe the emotional event more positively.***



*Reinterpretation: "there is no food in this winter, the man must feed his whole tribe so he has no choice other than killing the bear" (Porat et al., 2020)*

However, ***studies about the effect of reappraisal on personal conflict is scarce.*** Most studies instruct S to reinterpret a distant conflict instead of a personally experienced one.

Therefore, given the existing evidence, **we cannot provide a strong recommendation on how to best reduce conflict when it's ongoing.**



# Future study

Select two similar departments in a company and choose one of them as the treatment group and the other as the control group.

**Treatment group:** when managers detect workplace conflicts, managers intervenes and ask (e.g., “Does the issue of your conflicts really matter for your career or wellbeing? Could you interpret the difference as an opportunity to develop yourself? “)

**Control group:** apply control intervention as per company regulation

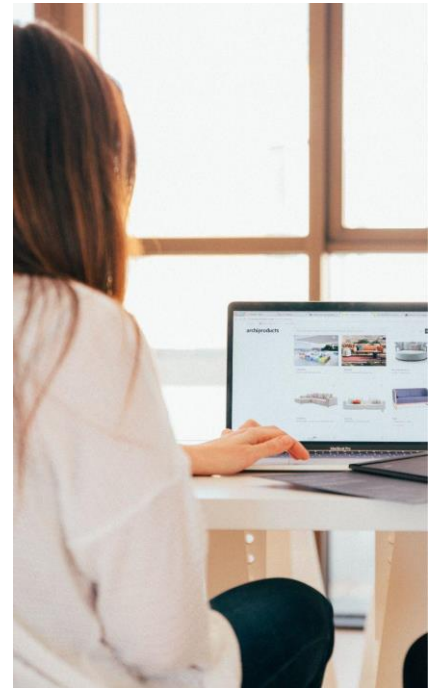
The treatment effects could be measured by the difference of the average duration of conflicts (e.g., days, hours) between the treatment group and the control group.

# Intervention **AFTER** Conflicts

In formal compliant procedures, *make the option of “compliant” more cognitively effortful to choose* (e.g., hiding the option in a foldable menu) and *make the option of mediation the chosen default*.

Once chosen, *employees will be asked to give a preferred time for mediation* to take place.

Additionally, to increase the salience of mediation, the company can place the contact of mediation center as a watermark on the top left corner of workplace desktop screen.





## Loewenstein et al. (2015)

### The effect of default

1027 participants age around 50 asked about their end-of-life preferences

3 choices: pursue treatment, decline treatment or leave the option to families. One choice was randomly chosen as the default.

Results suggests that in the context of *when participants had to choose one option to express their preferences*, default works effectively and consistently.

On average, **47% of the participants chose the default** regardless of whether the default is to pursue or decline the treatment.

## Bauer et al. (2021)

### The effect of false hierarchical design

1493 website visitors asked to indicate their cookie preference

The option to *“decline all cookie” is hide behind a neutral option (e.g., “manage settings”) to increase effort*, while the option “accept all” is not.

Results suggests that on average, **increasing friction to choose the “decline” option increases acceptance for 17%**. If only looking at users who made a choice, **99% of the treated accepted the cookie banner**.

Such high level of agreement to disclose sensitive information is achieved despite the public having a high privacy concern



## Limitation

### Only mediate the conflict that managers can detect

The nature of the cognitive reappraisal makes it less applicable to resolve conflict that occurs *less obviously*.

E.g., passive aggressive conversations, arguments that is purely through text.

However, interventions BEFORE and AFTER the conflict can tackle those conflict to at least minimize the potential impact.

### Long-term effect is concerning

If the workplace conflict dillima is practiced repetitively by employees, employees may *get used to* the proposed scenario and return back to the pre-intervention state.

### Inability to tackle underlying problems

Those interventions won't be able to tackle the problems that started the conflict since they are only trying to tackle the conflict itself.

In some cases, conflict may relapse and occurs periodically between employees since the *root of the problem was never resolved*.



## Conclusion

Given the prevalence and severity of unhealthy workplace conflicts, we suggest to use nudge to mitigate its possibility of occurrence and negative impacts.

- BEFORE** - Improve workplace cooperation by prompting employees to act morally when facing conflict
- DURING** - Reduce conflict persistence by actively asking employees to reinterpret the underlying issue more positively
- AFTER** - Reduce the post-conflict effects by making the option of mediation the default instead of formal complaints



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# Q&A

