

EPISODE 288: How to Effectively Deal with Workplace Conflict with Carol Bowser

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

Even though we know conflict is a natural part of life, it doesn't make it any easier to deal with conflict exists wherever people collaborate, and as managers, we know all too well, that we need to be able to navigate and address conflict so our teams can thrive. A warm welcome to Sarah W, Gina S, Karina B. And welcome back to Joie G.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:20

Today's guest is Carol Bowser. Carol is a workplace conflict expert. After practicing employment law for several years, she founded conflict management strategies when she realized a lawsuit can't deliver the level of resolution and satisfaction that is gained when people are actively involved in creating solutions to their workplace conflict. In her over 20 years of experience. She has discovered some universal themes about workplace conflict, and loves to share how people at all levels can strengthen their conflict resolution muscles. Carol, when I talk about conflict, obviously. We get into what causes it, how we can reframe our thinking around conflict, and how to actively engage in conflict more effectively. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:00

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to The Modern Manager podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week, I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at themodernmanager.com/more.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:25

Thank you so much for joining me today, Carol. I'm super psyched to talk about a topic that everybody hates, which is conflict, but is so present in all of our lives. So thank you so much for coming on the show with me today.

Carol Bowser 01:39

Of course, conflict is a great topic. It's fantastic. I mean, it's something that people have an emotional reaction to, maybe good, maybe bad, but it just means that something important is going on. So thrilled to talk to you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:55

Yeah, wait, I want to go back and you say some people have a good reaction to conflict. Is that the possible?

Carol Bowser 02:01

I think people should have a good reaction to conflict and also other things, some people do have a good reaction to conflict, and maybe not the best way. So let's talk about that first, if we could just dive into it. I don't know you or your listeners would say some people thrive on drama. Oh, and I think it's I'm gonna give a little bit of a personal story here, kind of a little bit of family history. I realized my grandmother who was you know, a wonderful, wonderful, deeply caring person. But she always, I realized as I was an adult, she always needed someone or something to worry about. And so it was like talking about worrying, and, you know, concern, and it was her way of showing love and affection. And sometimes I think managers may feel as though their job is to find the problem and to root out problems, and management is a difficult position. So maybe you know, for your listeners is work, do they feel that worrying is a sign that they're doing a good job, but worried also can cause interpersonal conflict and interpersonal, you know, and personal tension. So that may not, it may be kind of a good thing, it may be kind of a bad thing. And it could also be, you know, for a manager that your radar screen is in tune to the emotional climate, you know, because if you can notice that there might be some tension or conflict or disappointment, that can be a good managerial skill, because you're you're looking at the emotional climate. And I always view that conflict means that something important is going on. So if we look at conflict, not as a destructive force, but as an informative force, that somebody has an emotional reaction to something that is important to them. So wouldn't that be nice as a manager to kind of find out what might be unspoken important things for you, and for the people who you manage up to and for the people who depend on you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:02

Cool. And it makes a lot of sense to see when people are getting heated about something, especially in a meeting context, right. But it's often pretty obvious when someone is kind of

passionate about a position they're taking or, you know, pushing back on something, and they get heat and that creates that kind of, I think, generally healthy tension, healthy conflict that's occurring, to be able to see oh, this not just because they're being obnoxious, just because they're trying to be disruptive to our process. There's actually something I can learn from there I need to investigate. Is that what you're saying?

Carol Bowser 04:35

Yeah. And I have to tell you that I think that the word kind of healthy conflict. I have a reaction to that. I also have a reaction to when people say we want a win win situation. The reason why is because for a lot of people and I talk and I coach and I train and I facilitate mediate with a lot of people they will say, I have had traumatic events in my life working with folks who have PTSD isn't my forte. However, people said I've had a lot of negative experiences. And I have learned for kind of self preservation that I need to minimize or withdraw. And so when we say we want healthy conflict, you're telling people, No, I need for you to feel really unsafe, regardless of how much we try to create, you know, a safer environment, they may have decades and lifetimes of experience and even work experience, maybe even work experience with you saying, you know, what, I'm not sure that the consequences are worth this. However, we could say, you know, we want we want to be curious about different people's opinions, including if there's resistance to something, and the level of resistance to something, I think that that's that that's kind of important that we can use it for a barometer to be able to say that we want that, you know, we're interested in how other people are thinking and feeling about this. And if you're sensing some resistance, or some disappointment, or feeling as though there's too much of a risk, or that we're not really acknowledging your professional experience, or your gut instinct, or what your training has told you what I could or should be paying attention to, I think that's when people get frustrated. I think that's when people say, Hey, you want my ideas, but I never see my ideas reflected in your thinking. And no matter what I advocate for what there's always a decision the other way, which I think that's related to when we say we want a win win, because I think, and I put myself out on a limb here before because I've got dear dear friends and colleagues who say that they're looking for Win win. And I say, I think that setting up an expectation of you feel like you're going to win, that you really like it, and it setting the proverbial bar very, very high of what you're looking for. And sometimes it's like, I don't want it to feel like a win, maybe I just don't want to feel like I'm losing. Maybe I don't want to feel like a win. It's like, hey, it's sufficient enough for at this point in time. Or I think it just sets what might be an unrealistic expectation. And that way, you're dealing with unmet expectations, which, by the way, lead to conflict.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:14

I love this, we're just like going right in on all the things that we're doing wrong around conflict of saying, We want healthy conflict, we want you to jump in, we want you to disagree, right? And that, yeah, that's not gonna work for everyone. And that we need to find other ways to talk about

resistance or disagreement, that does get people to feel like it is safe to share their perspective. And that I want to unpack how to do that, because that's a whole a whole piece. But I want to talk about this Win-Win piece first, which is your comment about, sometimes you just want to feel like we're not going to lose. The power dynamic as a manager, right comes into play. Because if we're the one in conflict with someone, it's almost I don't even know how to explain that. There's a funny thing that happens where right you are holding the power and therefore, you get to maybe ultimately make the decision, you get to tell the person what is or what isn't. Right. And that's the pieces that can make them feel like they're not being heard. And all that. And so I think the Win Win mindset is, is one that I think a lot of managers probably hold and that I want my colleague to feel like that we're in this together, we're going to solve this together and not I'm going to come in and you know, bulldoze over you and just tell you what this thing is. Do you have thoughts about like how we can we how we can approach conflict when we're part of it? And we're we have we hold power of some sort over the person who we're in conflict with?

Carol Bowser 08:43

Oh, my gosh, okay, me and all the guests, let's pop out your favorite beverage sit back, because this is going to be awesome. So I have a couple of more than a couple of different thoughts about that one, first and foremost, that I want to echo what you said is the workplace is inherent with power dynamics. And I loved the prior podcast that you had with your guests that talked about power dynamics in the workplace, and like owning and stepping into your own positional power. And I think one of the things that happens in the workplace and for the managers, especially the newer managers, what I find in my experience of working with people, especially, you know, with human resource professionals or higher level managers, they have said on more than one occasion, Carol, look, I don't have decision making authority on this, you know, I don't have influence on this anymore. I've had human resource professionals when I'm brought in for conflict and they want to be able to speak truth to power and they have at least one has said, Carol, I hear what you're saying. And I have said that too. But I can no longer expand the social capital or the political and well to be able to keep doing this because they don't want to hear it from me anymore. So I think that's one thing from managers in particular is people assume because you have the title of manager that you have the ultimate decision making authority. And that may not be accurate, because you have a report up to explain to the person above you who maybe have to explain to the person above them. And if it's a family owned business, maybe it's not, you, maybe you don't have anybody, quote unquote, above you. But you have to explain to your spouse of why you made that decision. In the mediation world, we kind of call those like your second tier negotiators, the persons who are at the table or the people who aren't in the meeting. But you have to go and justify the decision of why you made made this and they weren't involved in the process. all they hear is the outcome. And they're like, Well, why No, did you do that. So I should going back to for the managers and power dynamics of you may or may not be able to disclose that, in fact, you do not have the authority to do that. Because the person above you may not have the authority to do that. One thing you can do is kind of maybe clarify of how much decision making authority, what is your scope of decision making authority in this particular way. And part of that goes to and here's a tool I want to call out for people of

recognizing what your risk tolerance is, what your individual team members risk tolerance is, and the person above you what their risk tolerance is, because I don't think we talk about that as managers and as a mediator and someone who coaches in conflict resolution, I will talk to people and I will often say, based on what you told me, I think you have different risk tolerances. And that means the person with the low risk tolerance is going to say no, a lot. And they're going to look for contingency plans, and this doesn't feel safe, or this isn't our tolerance level, versus people who have a higher risk tolerance, they will be like, Hey, let's go. And you know what, you asked me what I think and you keep saying no, no, no, no, no, no. So I'm not going to I'm going to stop telling you or maybe I'm going to start complaining about your management style. Because you say come in, it's psychologically safe, I want to hear what you have to say, but nothing ever gets implemented. So, you know, a tool is to be able to, you know, kind of consider of is there the same risk tolerance?

Carol Bowser 12:37

Can I give you a little bit of a story that demonstrates this?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 12:40

Yes, please.

Carol Bowser 12:41

Okay, so I was working with an organization with the senior leadership team, there had been lots of changes going through and they were clunky. Together, there may or may not have been some, you know, what was considered performance issues among those senior leadership team. Everybody was managing their own departments, but they needed to come together, they were a nonprofit, and they reported to a board and the board sent some very, very aggressive goals, very aggressive strategic goals, and during our, during our meetings together to you know, build the team and talk about things and become a more cohesive leadership team. They were talking about that. And then I stopped. And I said, huh, these seem like very, very, you know, aggressive goals. However, Executive Director, and director of HR and director of marketing, you have told me, because you want things proved and reproofed and reapproved four or five, six times, that you have told me that you demonstrate and operate the business with a very low risk tolerance, you want everything checked, double checked, you have systems, you have processes, you have policies, and you want the systems and processes and policies followed, to be more efficient, but also to minimize risk because you're an outward facing organization. So, I said, but all of you and all of the people you have hired that seem to be doing well, that seemed to fit into the culture that seemed to build really good relationships with one another that you like working with, they seem to have a fairly low risk tolerance, and they seem

to follow the policies and the processes and get why we have to have these things. The people who you're telling me you have trouble with are the people who don't really follow the policies and the process want more autonomy, want more freedom, and I think have a higher risk tolerance and you so you are telling me that the people who are have to implement these goals are low risk, but the people who are setting the goals are more comfortable, high risk and therefore want higher returns and a quicker turnaround. I see that a lot with managers as well. So for managers, how comfortable are you delegating, how come do well are you not delegating and what is safely delegating feel like to you versus feel like micromanagement other people safely delegating versus micromanagement means different risk tolerances means the opportunity for conflict.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 15:15

Yes. And I think this is something that I see also that the difference between someone's expectations, and then their ability to let someone else execute on those versus that I need to be in control here, and make sure that things are going the way that I want, and the way that I anticipate and expect and as soon as there's a bump in the road, right, we get the, the micro managers who are like, well, I'll just take it back, or I'm always putting out fires. And that's so unhelpful. And there's so much conflict and so many problems. So let's actually get really practical on on that front. And, you know, one of the things that you mentioned in the pre stuff from before was that we do things that can make conflict worse. And I'm wondering what some of those things are that we do that actually make conflict worse? And are any of those things related to jumping into quickly taking things away from folks, kind of diminishing this sense of the conflict, just kind of, like, shove it on to the side or whatever it might do. But what are some of those things that that we do that actually make the conflict worse, instead of actually addressing it or dissipating it or resolving it.

Carol Bowser 16:25

Something important is going on. So people do have an emotional response to conflict may be anger at maybe frustration, and maybe avoidance. And I think every organization, every team has what they view as an acceptable bandwidth of how we express emotion. And so one of the things if people are getting upset or withdrawn or things like that, we'll say things that we think are helpful, like, hey, well, we just need to calm down here. And that is, so minimizing and denying the individual person's experience. And I do think it goes to do people feel heard and recognized and appreciated, is their professional point of view being reflected. And then they if they don't feel heard, they can get agitated. And so just saying, Hey, you just need to calm down. I think it's very, very minimizing. And then also, my husband does this all the time. And he'll say, hey, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, just slow down. And I'm thinking, dude, I'm not going fast. But it says short down for like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. And we also say things like, if we do have a high risk tolerance, or a very optimistic and view, you know, changes

and opportunities is something really amazing, well, they say, like, hey, everything's gonna work out, that's one of those things of people don't feel heard, because we're in their frame of reference, or their professional experience. It's not. And that's why they're bringing it forward. So for example, there are certain professions that are designed and told that part of their professional responsibility is to look for risk. Okay? Lawyer, in the past lawyer, lawyers were really good at spotting risk. I also find in IT, the folks whose job is to run software and look for bugs, that's their job, that's what you pay them to do. Similarly, speaking, human resources can look at that, you know, bookkeeping and finance can look at things that that potentially pose a risk, if we're looking. I work in the building industry, a bit like building inspectors are looked to find risks. And if we tell them, you know, everything's gonna work out. They're like, no no no no no, you know, I need for you to know, understand and appreciate what I'm seeing. And so I'm going to call that out for, for managers. What, in the communication that people are giving you directly? Or maybe subtly? What is it that they are wanting you to know? What is it they're wanting you to fully understand? And what is it that they want you to appreciate for them bringing that forward? And what I mean, appreciate of what are they trying to tell you about their professional experience, or what they see are critical issues or risk management issues in that so no, understand appreciate? And if you're saying things like, well, you know, you're not just being logical or Yeah, but you know, those are all of those things that are very, very minimizing and are going to impact how and when and if they come to you, and if there's always a reason why you're not picking up anything that they're saying. You're kind of training learned helplessness, why am I going to what am I going to keep going to this manager of nothing I ever say makes a difference. So again, know, understand and appreciate and going back to one of the original points you You may not have the decision making authority, they may believe that you do have the decision making authority. And it can kind of be weird because you don't want to say, Well, my boss isn't gonna let me because that kind of, you know, you know, minimizes you. At the same time, you could say, Hmm, that seems like it might be outside of the bandwidth, or that may not be a strategic priority, or the timing may not be right on that. And let me see what I what I can run up, read what I can run up the chain to see, you know, what, what about that we may be able to do so long as it aligns with, you know, the risk tolerance and the current priorities in the current budget.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:45

I love those examples you just gave. And it's making me wonder about the opposite situation. So instead of the team member coming to us with the issue, right, and we're kind of stuck in a place where we can't we don't maybe have the authority or our risk tolerance is maybe higher than what the situation would allow. But what if it's the opposite? What if we're the one who's going to the team member is like, tell me where we're at on these things? I want to know what's going on. And the team was like, Don't worry about it, I got it. Like, it's all good. We're gonna hit the deadlines off by and you're like, No, no, no, I need to know more than that I can, I cannot just let this go as right going back to that place of micromanagement and kind of expectation setting. But how do you suggest that we approach it when we're the one who has the low risk tolerance, but our team members, maybe have much higher and feel much more comfortable

kind of navigating? We're feeling a little left out of the situation?

Carol Bowser 21:37

Oh, my gosh, I have many, many clients who who say that. So I'm going to go in at least two different directions. One, that the spectrum between checking in and micromanagement is very, very personal. And if a lot of your team really values their autonomy, that that's really critical. Then you checking in may feel like micromanagement. And so maybe, able to reframe it of saying, you know, I got it doesn't give me enough concrete information to report. So it reminds me a little bit of law school that people would give an answer and my professor from property, my first year, here's a shout out to your professional Olmstead. If you're out there anyway, he would always say, because, and I have that in my mind, maybe, because in the law, when people would make a conclusory statements, an objection you can do in court is say, Objection Conclusory. Meaning that you've given me the conclusion, I need you to state what factors has brought you to that conclusion. And I think for managers, it's saying, Great, I'm going to need to report up to be able to say these, not just that we have met the milestones, or we're on track, and I said, But and I want to make sure that you and I are looking at the same information and putting the same interpretation on it. So can you help me understand what you are looking at, that tells you we are on time and on track. So for example, I am working with a client right now where the manager saying like, this is kind of driving me crazy, I am working with a slightly newer team. And also that some of the team has been there a longer time. So they are they feel as though they've got it all covered, hey, don't worry about it, don't worry about it, I got it. And the manager is saying I have a void of information. This feels ambiguous. What I have is a conclusion. However, I don't know what they're looking at. And a part of my job is to empower them. Great, we've got them empowered. However, a part of my job is also to interact with other departments and communicate cross department and communicate up I don't have enough information to be able to communicate cross department or to be able to communicate up these are the things my boss and my boss's boss are going to want to know. So can you tell me what factors you're looking at? There's that piece. There's also some teams may be thinking that they're making a lot of progress, but a manager who has been around could say I have been here several different times, and I know they are making progress. However, I know we're going to hit a critical piece. And unless we further along, it's gonna get bound up which is not going to be good. That being said, there's a lot of projects where it's certain things may be slowed to ramp up. And then there's a flurry of activity. And that's just expected. However, that may not be the case. And it may be that it's front loaded, that a lot of stuff needs to happen, then you have to hurry up and wait for other things to happen. So for the manager, then to avoid feelings of micromanagement being able to say, okay, great. Can you tell me what you're looking at and what milestones you have reached. So that way I can communicate that up. So that way, if it is a long run up, and then a flurry of activity, not just the way this project works, I can communicate that up versus other people looking in and saying, why were the last three months such a, you know, we can think of a lot of use a friend Yeah, frenzy, that's a really good way to say, well, that's why I was in such a frenzy. So being able to go beyond it, maybe in your head saying, Objection Conclusionary. To okay, I need to be able to communicate this up beyond, hey, we're

on track. And that is going to help other people who who may be looking at this and have questions about where we are that I have enough information to be able to articulate to them, especially if they feel as though they are going to be judged on how well they are overseeing our project.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:21

That makes perfect sense. And I can see it would be very similar. If you're looking at a decision together, and you're like, show me the information that has brought you to this position, right? What perspective are you bringing here, right? It's the same thing of like, I need to understand this. So that I can be confident and I can relay it to others to so giving yourself that that leeway to say, right, I'm not assuming that you don't know what you're talking about. I'm not trying to not trust you. What I want to know is I just need, I need to see kind of under the hood, so that I have the information I need to be able to do my job. I love that framing.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:58

All right, well, we are running out of time. So Carol, can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for? And what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Carol Bowser 27:06

Well, I was thinking about this. And I realized, well, maybe this is a reason why I work for myself. However, there was one manager that I took when one thing away from her. And I was working at a community mediation center as their director of, of training. And one of the things that this director wanted to do is make a very warm and welcoming environment for people. And this sounds weird, but she used to go to the party store and get doilies. If you don't know what doilies are, they tend to be those little paper lace things that you see kids in elementary school make crafts out of. And so she would do that kind of with the coffee cups and different things. And, and it sounds weird. She said, you know, a lot of people are never going to notice and never going to appreciate this. However, there are some people who will notice and appreciate. So we are doing it for the people who will notice and will appreciate. And it seems to convey a higher standard of service and also a higher standard of customer experience. And I think she took that across all of the different things that were the expectations of the job and creating that experience for the user. So she called it the doily approach. And I think that I've tried to I've tried to incorporate that. And the fact that I remember it decades later. And sometimes I don't always, you know, it's like, okay, sometimes it feels like a hot mess. And I'm not doing the doily approach. But that's one thing of what is it that we're doing in the business? That's a doily approach, so that for those people who will notice they're going to notice. And I think that can also be you know, are you presumed to be a micromanager because you're

wanting these extra things that seem like they're going to make busier work versus saying, you know, there are some people who are going to notice, and they are going to appreciate it. So we are we are looking to be able to make a connection for the user experience for those who will notice and whether that's an internal user experience with an intra team or outward, outward facing. It's like, what might somebody appreciate? And let's try to incorporate that into how we do things.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:20

Yeah, such a good reminder doesn't have to work for everyone. But for people who works for the matters so beautiful. And where can people learn more about you and keep up with your work?

Carol Bowser 29:29

Well, a couple of different places they can jump on to managingconflict.com, Where I regularly post blogs, and they can find access to sign up for the Conflict Tip of the Day, a tip a trick technique to be able to help everybody strengthen their conflict resolution muscles. And a lot of managers tell me that they like it and they ended up sharing it with their team to start having these conversations about risk and risk tolerance and how we do things around here. And then also they can follow me on most social media. And you can follow me on [LinkedIn, Carol Bowser](#), were a few years ago, someone said I was one of the top 30 people to follow on LinkedIn regarding conflict resolution.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:09

All right. Well, thank you again, so much for joining me today. Such a pleasure. And I feel already so much more confident about how I can approach conflict at work.

Carol Bowser 30:18

My pleasure. Now go out and do it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:21

Carol is providing members of Podcast Plus a grounding exercise worksheet from Conflict Management Strategies for free. It walks you through specific steps you can take before

meeting or whenever you need to feel more grounded. Members also get the extended interview, where Carol explains what to do when things get emotional, whether that means the person starts crying or gets overly heated. To get this guest bonus and many more become a member at themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Find that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.