

Lesson outcome

Learners can use vocabulary related to managing conflict.

Lead-in

1 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- 1 When having a discussion, do you tend to argue your point of view, or do you prefer to reach a quick compromise?
- 2 Do you believe arguing or confronting people is a waste of time? Why / Why not?
- 3 Have you ever changed your mind about someone you disliked initially? What happened?

Reading

2 Read the text quickly and say which of the ideas are mentioned.

- 1 If we never changed our minds, we wouldn't be progressed humans.
- 2 Eileen Carroll says we should give eye contact, and not get too emotional in a disagreement.
- 3 Companies need to learn how to deal with conflict.
- 4 It's best to confront a difficult person in public.

3 Read the text and complete the gaps with sentences A-F. There is one extra sentence you do not need.

- A And I have seen too many poor decisions that, with time and a genuine capacity to listen, might have become good ones.
- B Over time, we built trust and respect.
- C she suggested she would mediate between the investor and the CEOs.
- D Discussions take place in small groups.
- E It is easy and tempting to conclude that argument is just a waste of time.
- F she cited tools that were dauntingly modest: listening, questions, patience and time.

4 Read the text again and answer the questions.

- 1 What did the writer's colleagues think about their investor?
- 2 What is the writer's attitude regarding conflict?
- 3 What often happens when two parties in a dispute start listening to each other?
- 4 Which factors help relationships to develop?
- 5 Why do boards and shareholders find it difficult to understand how mediation works?
- 6 What ways did the writer find to work with her investor? How did their relationship change?

5 Discuss with a partner or in small groups.

- 1 What's the attitude to conflict in your organisation or team?
- 2 What kind of topics do you or your colleagues have an aversion to, or find difficult to discuss openly in your organisation?
- 3 'Listening, questions, patience and time help people to reach a compromise.' To what extent do you agree?

Vocabulary

6 Match the words in bold to their definition.

- 1 I bumped into my former manager today. He's difficult but we managed to have a **civil conversation**. He was surprisingly quite amicable.
 - 2 It's as if you come up against a wall of **organisational silence** whenever you try to discuss hot-button issues with management.
 - 3 As a trade union representative, Marta was met with **hostile silence** when speaking up for employees during the meeting.
 - 4 The two parties don't see eye to eye so I'm certain this **commercial dispute** about transportation costs will last for weeks.
 - 5 As head of HR, I am used to people coming into my office and having **emotional melt-downs** now and again, especially when stressed.
 - 6 The Prime Minister admitted they had been wrong; it was a **humiliating climb-down** for the government regarding international trade.
- a serious argument or disagreement in business
 - b bad psychological state when someone gets angry or upset and breaks down
 - c situation when managers disapprove of something but refuse to talk about the problem
 - d dialogue in which people tolerate one another but are not particularly friendly
 - e occasion when you admit embarrassingly that you were wrong
 - f situation when someone is quietly angry and deliberately unfriendly towards someone

7 Choose the correct option in these sentences.

- 1 If you *demonise* / *dress down* someone or a group of people, you make them out to be an evil force.
- 2 *Stand-off* / *Mockery* is when someone laughs at someone or shows that they think you are stupid.
- 3 A *stand-off* / *Mockery* is a situation in which neither side in a fight or conflict can gain an advantage.
- 4 When you *stand-off* / *dress down* someone, you speak to them angrily about something they have done wrong, usually in front of others.

8 Complete the questions using words and phrases from Exercises 6 and 7. Then discuss them in pairs or small groups.

- 1 Can you think of any bitter commercial _____ that have been in the news recently?
- 2 When was the last time you had a _____ with someone who you don't get on well with, or have fallen out with?
- 3 It's very easy to _____ the other side when we think we are right. What could we do to understand the other party better in a conflict? How can a third party help?
- 4 What would you do if a colleague had a(n) _____ while you were talking to them about an important issue at work?
- 5 What can be done to break _____ and improve communication between two sides in a difficult meeting?
- 6 Have you, or has any one you know ever had an unpleasant confrontation or _____ with someone? What happened? What should you or they have done differently? How could a mediator have helped?

Speaking

9 Work in a group of three. Choose a situation from the box when you might need to manage a conflict or mediate between two colleagues.

an argument about the office air-conditioning or heating system
 an argument about noise and distractions in the office
 an argument about keeping the shared office kitchen clean

Student A and B are colleagues with differing points of view. Student C listens and mediates. Look at your information. Read your role cards.

Student A:

You are convinced that you are right. Blame the other party for being anti-social and selfish in the shared space. You have a deadline approaching and are stressed at work. You would love to work from home but you don't have the space and the office chairs are better.

Student B:

You are convinced that it isn't your problem. Blame the other party for being a bully and too demanding about shared office space. You want to relax, talk to your team and get on with your job. Tell them to work from home. They are creating a bad atmosphere among staff.

Student C:

When the argument gets conflictive, you intervene to mediate and help reach a compromise. Try to practise these key steps:

- Ask people to explain how they feel without blaming each other.
- Stress common objectives to build trust and respect.
- Force the two parties to listen to each other.
- Listen actively and summarise points as the discussion develops.
- Try to shift their perspectives: get them to change their minds.
- Use positive body language and notice the body language of others.
- Propose a way forward.

FT

There is nothing wrong with changing your mind

by Margaret Heffernan

When I was running tech companies in the 1990s, I had an investor who was a bully. He would routinely dress down chief executive officers in public to demonstrate that they were wrong and stupid. The CEOs would retreat, muttering that there was no point discussing anything with him — he was never going to change his mind.

Aversion to debate and organisational silence run deep in corporations, primarily due to the fear of conflict. Studies have shown that we are all biased, preferring people and media we agree with, and that our brains are lazy, preferring consensus to conflict. ¹

I beg to differ. After all, if we never changed our minds, we would still be living in caves. The question isn't how to avoid conflict but how to do it well. For Eileen Carroll, shifting perspective is critical. A QC*, she founded the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution because she believed the brutal win/lose environment of the courtroom was too often unproductive.

The centre mediates everything from consumer complaints to large commercial disputes. When asked how she was so often able to get people to compromise, ² In exchange for telling their side of the story, people must listen to the other side. They often discover they had not known all the facts and the two sides frequently start to develop a common language.

Meeting face to face makes it harder to demonise the other side; both are rarely perfect and relationships start to develop. Taking time to reconsider overnight often helps. Ms Carroll is admired for her patience but also her rigour; people need time, she says, but also momentum and it is her job to

balance the two. When I asked her what absolutely did not work, she was adamant: belligerence, mockery, shouting, lack of eye contact and emotional melt-downs.

But there are better ways to work. Political scientist James Fishkin has been experimenting with deliberative polling since 1994, bringing together people in 28 different countries to discuss hot-button issues. Participants are provided with briefing documents that experts on all sides agree are balanced and fair. ³ Prof Fishkin measures opinions privately before and after the discussion. He repeatedly finds that people read the materials carefully and do change their minds. "The public," he told me, "are not stupid, and if you engage them in a thoughtful and balanced way with good information and they think their voice matters, they turn out to be very smart."

Boards, executive committees and shareholders should understand and practise these processes. But most are too afraid or unskilled. I have seen too many stand-offs where a change of mind was resisted because it was deemed a humiliating climb-down. I have sat in too many boardrooms listening to hostile silence. ⁴ Conflict helps organizations think and progress. We all need to do it much better.

Eventually, I found a way to work with my investor. I never confronted him in public. I sent materials I wanted to discuss ahead of time. Face to face, we had civil conversations and I rarely pressed him for an immediate response. He was (and is) a brilliant man. ⁵ And I changed my mind about him.

*QC= Queen's Counsel; a barrister of high rank in the British legal system