

**The Bright + Early
Guide To:**

Work Fights

The logo for Bright + Early, featuring the word "Bright" in a serif font with a small sunburst icon above the letter "i", and the word "+Early" in a similar serif font below it.

**Bright
+Early**

Introduction

Being in conflict at work is one of the toughest professional challenges you'll face. Whether it's with your boss, someone who reports to you, or coworker, having a beef at the office is at best distracting, and at worst a potential career risk. While it's tempting to vent to a work bestie who will tell us that we're right about everything (and that the other person is the *worst*), confronting conflict and your own role in it is both a mark of professional maturity and also, generally, a more peaceful way to live out your 9-5 life.

But right now, you're pissed off. It's beyond giving simple feedback – it's affecting your ability to work with this person, or even be around them. What next?

Trust us, we've been there. In our work at Bright + Early, we've broken up slack emoji arguments (surprisingly cutthroat), sat through tearful mediation sessions, and even flown two feuding co founders to the top of a literal mountain to talk it out. Work conflict is such a common thing that we've put together a framework and worksheet based on our experience, and the best stuff we've learned from other experts. Here's how to squash the beef, no mountain required.

Note: This guide is **not meant to apply to situations where harassment, abuse violence or other incidents of serious misconduct are involved. We're talking more about general, resolvable and typical conflicts here.*

Step 1 - Gather Information

Ready for some self reflection? Settle down in a comfortable place, at a time where you feel relaxed and free of interruptions. Take a few breaths and reflect on whether you're ready to be objective and look inwards. If you're still extremely stressed or angry it may not be the time to start. When you feel calm and ready, answer the following questions honestly and without judgement of yourself or anyone else involved.

What are the **facts** of this situation? This can't contain any judgements, opinions or guessing at someone's intentions - only straight facts. What do you know to be true? In this instance, we don't *know* Jimmy is a jerk – that would be a judgement. All we can state as a fact is Jimmy's behaviour.

✘ *Jimmy is a jerk.*

✓ *Jimmy gave my boss negative feedback about my work before even speaking to me about it.*

What is my **narrative**? What are my opinions? What blanks am I filling in about the other person and their intentions? This is where you can state your judgements, don't worry yet about whether these are true or not.

☞ *Jimmy is a jerk; Jimmy is trying to get me fired.*

My narrative is:

How did this make me feel? Circle or add your own. **I FELT:**

Powerless	Trapped	Unheard	Excluded	Like I couldn't speak up
Frustrated	Blamed	Ignored	Unsafe	Like I couldn't be honest
Disconnected	Judged	Disrespected	Lonely	A lack of interest
Manipulated	Scolded	Uncared for	Controlled	Like the bad guy
				Like it was unfair

I felt:

Do some self reflection. How am I showing up and behaving in this situation, whether it's justified or not? Could I be contributing to this? What stressors exist for me outside of this situation?

☞ *I'm avoiding Jimmy, including giving only bare minimum updates on information he needs for his work; I'm treating him with suspicion and giving him the cold shoulder. I'm going through a tough breakup right now and feel sensitive about being treated with what I perceive as disrespect.*

How I'm showing up:

What might Jimmy's view be? Are there any organizational issues like policies, opposing departmental goals, etc. that are impacting this conflict?

☞ *Jimmy has a regular 1:1 meeting with my boss, but Jimmy and I don't have any regular meetings where it would be natural for feedback to come up in conversation.*

Things impacting this conflict:

Step 2: Make a Plan

So, what next? When you're in a conflict, the options you have are to remove yourself entirely; accept it; or try to change it. Removing yourself is not always possible in a work environment and it might not be what you want if you like your job and coworkers otherwise. Accepting it is an option, but if it's truly upsetting you, it will likely continue to be. Trying to change it might be uncomfortable, but it offers a chance at improving the situation, practicing your feedback muscle, and returning to a peaceful, stress-free work environment. Ready to dive into change?

What do you want to be different?

⇒ I want Jimmy to come to me first with feedback and I want us to work together without friction again

I want:

What are some options **in your control** that you can choose to create a shift in the situation and/or in yourself?

⇒ I can explain more clearly to Jimmy what it is that's bothering me and the impact it is having on my work.

⇒ I can communicate my expectations with greater clarity.

⇒ I can get to know Jimmy better and try to understand his viewpoint.

Pick one that would be most effective in creating the change you want

I will:

What are the risks and benefits to pursuing this option? What are the risks and benefits of not pursuing this option?

⇒ Risks of not - he keeps offending me and making me look bad. Risk of doing it - he doesn't respond well and the conflict escalates..

Risk of not taking action:

Risk of taking action:

What does support and accountability look like for you?

What do you need to take this step? What do you need from the other person?

⇒ I need to have an honest conversation with Jimmy. I need Jimmy to listen, and then to explain why he goes to my boss with feedback first, so we can figure out what logistics need to be in place to have him come to me directly. If I have a part in this, or if Jimmy feels I do, it's my responsibility to make him feel heard and supported as well.

I need to:

I need the other person to:

Step 3: Have a conversation

After you finish reflecting on the issue and what you'd like to do about it, it's time to take action. Here are some things to think about before diving into a conflict resolution conversation:

1. Determine whether it would be helpful to you if this meeting was mediated. If you or the other party are still really angry or upset, it's probably a good idea. A mediator can be a lead or manager, or someone from your People/HR team.
2. Schedule a conversation with the other party.
 - Let them know what it is about "Jimmy, I'd like to meet to talk about how we give each other feedback"
 - Give enough notice for you both (& a potential mediator) to prepare
3. Do some prep.
 - Ideally, both parties should go through the gathering and planning stages separately, and on their own time. Feel free to share this framework with the person you're in conflict with. You can try a statement like

"I know we've been having some trouble giving each other feedback, and I'd like to resolve it amicably. I've been using this framework to think about my role in this and how we can work together going forward. Would you like to try filling it out as well and we can meet next Monday?"

4. Set meeting ground rules. Some good ones:

- This is not a fight. We are not trying to win, we are trying to solve and move forward in a healthy way
- Reflective listening, meaning each party listens fully with no interruptions.
- Each party will work to recognize signs that they are feeling heated or rigid. They will take time out if they need it before continuing.
- Any other rules the parties agree on - eg. confidentiality

5. It's time to talk! If you are feeling awkward or unsure how to start or structure the conversation, try this script we often use, adapted from our work with professional coach [Paul Warner](#):

"The facts in this situation are....."

"The narrative I make about this is....."

"And that makes me feel...."

"Which makes me act/show up in the following way....."

"Going forward, I would like"

The other person should listen intently and reflect back (*"What I'm hearing is that you feel angry and powerless when I go to your boss with feedback about your work instead of coming directly to you and giving you a chance to improve. Is that right?"*) before switching roles and following the same process. Sometimes this can take a few back and forth rounds. Keep going until you feel the air is clear. This process helps develop empathy, understand our roles in the conflict, and sort out the root causes.

Remember, the meeting goals are:

- Hearing each other out
- Apologies and/or acknowledgements of our own negative contributions to the conflict
- Designing an alliance. This means coming out with a list of tangible action items to prevent this conflict from escalating again, including:
 - Agreement on how we will communicate if one or both of us is feeling upset
 - Any necessary changes in workflows or systems
 - Commitment from both parties that they will respect the agreement

If your coworker isn't open to having a discussion, or doesn't follow the rules you set out, it may be time to bring in a third party like your manager or HR. Squashing office beef is tough, but if someone is truly unwilling, that becomes an issue between them and their workplace, not one between the two of you. You can rest assured knowing that you did your best to tackle it with an open mind.

Step 4: Going Forward

Great! You've had a successful, open conversation and maybe even designed an alliance. After you've both laid your cards on the table and openly discussed the roles you both played in the disagreement, it's time to change your behaviour towards each other. This may take some time and a few leaps of faith. In the early stages, it's best to over communicate your expectations, needs and feelings to avoid any misunderstandings, and to check in with yourself and your coworker whenever you feel a fact turning into a narrative. You might never be work besties, but over time, with mutual work and communication, you might find a solid coworker you can work well with and even learn from.

About Bright + Early



Bright + Early is a modern HR consultancy focused on building the world's best workplaces. As a team with a strong background in scaling small companies, we specialize in working with startups, creative teams and nonprofits. We take a friendly, custom and creative approach to everything we build, ensuring it's inclusive, compliant, and speaks to your team.

Who We've Helped

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 rubikcloud

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