

HR HOUSTON · HR IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD · June 9, 2026



inquiring minds
WORKPLACE CONFLICT RESOLUTION
AND INVESTIGATIONS

Early Action That Works: Practical Ways HR Can Defuse Workplace Conflict Before It Escalates

An interactive session for HR professionals

65%

of conflicts
go unaddressed

Source: SHRM, 2023

3×

more likely to
leave or quit within 12 months

Source: CPP Inc. Global Study

\$359B

annual cost of
workplace conflict

Source: CPP Inc., 2008



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Your Presenters Today



Amy S. McDowell

Employment Lawyer, Workplace Investigator, Workplace Conflict Resolution Facilitator & Human Resources Trainer

Amy has over 25 years of experience managing sensitive workplace issues — from employee disputes to large-scale investigations. Amy's clients rave about her HR trainings because they are engaging, insightful and practical, equipping leaders and employees with tools they can apply immediately in their day-to-day work.



Sasha Vaikhman

Employment Lawyer, Workplace Investigator, Workplace Conflict Resolution Facilitator, Human Resources Trainer & Mediator

Sasha brings nearly 25 years of legal experience and is passionate about helping organizations resolve disputes through mediation and workplace conflict resolution. Employers trust Sasha to conduct workplace investigations and deliver HR trainings because she helps teams navigate challenging situations with practical solutions.

What We'll Cover in 60 Minutes

1

Why Early Action Matters

The cost of waiting + warning signs

2

What Early Resolution Looks Like

Real-world scenarios + conversation skills

3

Interactive Activity

Practice: you try it

4

Step-by-Step HR Playbook

Tools you can use tomorrow

5

When NOT to Use These Approaches

Know your limits

6

Q&A

Your questions

Why Conflict Usually Gets Ignored



"It'll probably work itself out."

— *The most expensive sentence in HR*



"It's not serious enough"

Small friction is dismissed. But tension compounds and by the time it's "serious," options are limited.



Fear of making it worse

HR hesitates to intervene, worried a conversation could spark a complaint or legal claim.



No clear process

Without a framework, every situation feels like improvisation. Ambiguity breeds inaction.

Why Early Conflict Resolution Pays Off

Four compelling reasons to act before things get formal



Significant Cost Savings

Workplace conflict costs U.S. employers an estimated \$359B annually in lost productivity, absenteeism, and turnover. A single formal investigation can run \$15,000–\$50,000+ in HR time, legal fees, and management distraction. Early resolution — often a structured conversation costing a fraction of that — short-circuits the financial spiral before it starts.

CPP Inc. Global Human Capital Report



Getting to the Real Issue

What an employee says the problem is rarely the whole story. A complaint about a coworker's "tone" may really be about feeling overlooked for a promotion. A performance dispute may mask a breakdown in trust. Early resolution surfaces the root cause, not just the presenting symptom, and allows you to address what's actually broken before it hardens into a formal claim.

Root cause over surface complaint



Rehabilitating a High-Value Employee

Not every difficult employee is expendable. A top performer whose interpersonal friction is creating tension may be worth saving, if the right intervention happens early enough. Early conflict resolution gives that employee a structured path to reset expectations, understand impact, and re-engage constructively. Losing them to termination or resignation costs far more than the conversation.

Retain talent, reset behavior



When Discipline or Termination Isn't an Option

Sometimes HR's hands are tied. The employee has seniority, union protections, or a pending accommodation request. The documentation isn't there yet. The conduct doesn't meet the bar for formal action, but it's clearly disruptive. In these situations, early conflict resolution isn't plan B. It's the most credible, defensible, and effective tool available.

Your best move when others are off the table

The Escalation Ladder

Where you intervene determines the cost — in time, money, and relationships

Level 5: Litigation / Regulatory Complaint

\$\$\$\$+ Months–Years

Level 4: Formal HR Investigation

\$\$\$ Weeks–Months

Level 3: Formal Written Complaint

\$ 1–4 Weeks

Level 2: Manager Escalation / HR Complaint

\$ Days–Weeks

Level 1: Early Tension / Crossed Wires

Low cost · Act now

← Intervene HERE (Not Too Late)

← Intervene HERE (2nd BEST)

← Intervene Here (BEST)

Cost goes up with every rung you wait

Spot the Warning Signs Early



Tone changes

Short replies, passive-aggressive emails, sudden formality between coworkers who were friendly



Avoidance behavior

Skipping shared meetings, working different hours, routing communication through third parties



Manager side-venting

"I just wanted to give you a heads up..." — the unofficial complaint before the official one



Performance dips

Productivity drops, increased absences, or quality issues that track to a relationship problem



Team atmosphere shift

Others on the team noticing and taking sides; morale quietly declining around a specific dynamic



Repeated small issues

The same two names keep appearing in minor complaints or scheduling friction. Pattern recognition

Early Resolution Is NOT:

-  Forcing people to be friends
-  Making someone apologize
-  Deciding who is right
-  A formal mediation session
-  Dismissing anyone's concerns
-  A way to discipline or punish an employee

Early Resolution IS:

-  Creating space to reset expectations
-  A guided conversation with neutral structure
-  Giving both people a way forward
-  Informal, flexible, and low-stakes
-  Fast — before positions harden
-  A way for employees to feel heard

A Sample Early Conflict Resolution Day

What a full-day Inquiring Minds session looks like from the inside

9:00 – 10:30	 Background Meeting <i>Facilitator meets with HR and/or Business Leaders</i>	Gather context, understand history, review any prior documentation. Can be conducted in advance for longer individual sessions.
10:30 – 11:45	 Individual Session — Employee 1 <i>Facilitator meets with Employee 1 privately</i>	Private, structured conversation. Employee 1 shares their experience in a safe, neutral setting.
11:45 – 1:00	 Individual Session — Employee 2 <i>Facilitator meets with Employee 2 privately</i>	Same process with Employee 2. Facilitator listens, identifies shared interests, and assesses readiness for joint session.
1:00 – 1:30	 Break <i>Rest & reset</i>	Facilitator reviews notes, identifies common ground, and prepares framework for the joint afternoon session.
1:30 – 3:30	 Joint Session <i>Facilitator meets with Employee 1 & 2 together</i>	Both employees participate in a facilitated conversation focused on a path forward — not relitigating the past.
3:30 – 4:00	 Break <i>Reflection time</i>	Parties reflect on agreements reached. Facilitator drafts a brief summary of next steps.
4:00 – 5:00	 Debrief with Leadership <i>Facilitator meets with HR and/or Business Leaders</i>	Summary of outcomes, recommended follow-up, and guidance on how to support the parties going forward.

* Timing is flexible. Sessions can be condensed, split across two days, or expanded for more complex situations.

You Can Do This

How to adapt the Inquiring Minds approach for an internal HR-led session

THE ADAPTED HR SCHEDULE	
Before Day 1	 Triage & Preparation <i>HR reviews documentation, prior complaints, and relevant history</i>
Morning	 Individual Session — Employee 1 <i>HR meets privately with Employee 1</i>
Midday	 Individual Session — Employee 2 <i>HR meets privately with Employee 2</i>
Buffer	 Reflect Before Joining <i>HR reviews notes — do not skip this step</i>
Afternoon	 Joint Session <i>HR facilitates Employee 1 & 2 together</i>
Close	 Document & Follow Up <i>HR records outcomes and schedules check-in</i>

** Can be spread across two half-days if a full day isn't feasible.*

KEY ADJUSTMENTS FOR INTERNAL HR



Neutrality Takes Extra Work

You know these people. Be explicit upfront: your role is facilitator, not judge. Say it at the start of each session.



Watch Your Prior Involvement

Coached one party? Received an earlier complaint? Consider whether you can be genuinely neutral — or whether to use a colleague or bring in outside help.



Keep 1:1s Strictly Confidential

What each person shares stays there. Disclosures do not go to the other party. This is what makes sharing possible.



Document

Record that the session happened, what was agreed, and your follow-up date.



Know When to Hand Off

Legal concerns, protected-class issues, or a clear power imbalance means stop and escalate — or refer to an external resource.

Who Should Conduct the Session?

The right facilitator makes the difference between a reset and a disaster

THREE NON-NEGOTIABLE CRITERIA



Neutrality

The facilitator must have no stake in the outcome, no preference for either party, no history of advocacy for one side. Perceived neutrality is as important as actual neutrality. If either party believes the facilitator is biased, the process fails before it starts.



Independence

True independence means the facilitator answers to the process, not to the org chart. A manager who supervises one of the parties, or an HR leader who reports to the same VP, is not independent, even with the best intentions. Independence also means freedom from pressure to produce a particular outcome.



Credibility with Both Parties

Both employees must trust that the facilitator will listen fairly and treat what they share with discretion. Without credibility, employees hold back and the session surfaces only what people are willing to perform, not what's actually going on.

The goal is a process both parties trust. If internal HR can't provide that — for any reason — that's not a failure. That's good judgment.

The 4-Step HR Reset Conversation

A framework you can use — flexible, not a script

1

Open with curiosity, not conclusions

"I've noticed some tension and wanted to check in. Help me understand your experience." Let them talk first.

2

Name the impact, not the intent

"The effect on the team is [X]. I'm not here to decide who's right. I'm here to help find a path forward."

3

Ask the forward-looking question

"What would working well together look like from your perspective?" Future focus unlocks solutions past grievances won't.

4

Agree on small, concrete next steps

"Can we agree to [specific behavior]? Let's check back in two weeks." Make it real with a follow-up.

Step-by-Step: From First Signal to Resolution

01

Triage the Signal

Assess: How serious? How long? Who's involved?
Document what you heard and when.

02

Separate Conversations First

Meet with each person individually. Listen 80%, talk 20%.
Don't share what one person said.

03

Assess Readiness for Joint Session

Both people need to agree. If one isn't ready, coach them first. Never force a joint meeting.

04

Facilitate the Reset

Use the 4-step framework. Stay neutral. Keep focus on the future, not relitigating the past.

05

Follow Up — In Writing

Send a brief summary: 'We discussed X, agreed to Y, checking in on [date].' Record without formality.

06

Monitor and Reassess

Check in with both parties in 2 weeks. Persistent tension? Escalate your approach accordingly.

Let's Try It: A Live Brainstorming Session

WE NEED TWO VOLUNTEERS (don't worry — you're playing characters, not yourselves!)

Amy and Sasha will walk you through a real brainstorming session — the kind that happens in an actual conflict resolution session.

The joint session goal: brainstorm what a healthy working relationship could look like — concrete, specific, agreed by both.

Volunteer 1: The Employee

"Jordan" · Marketing Coordinator, 3 years

Jordan's 1:1 with HR reveals:

- ✓ Feels disrespected and not valued by her manager
- ✓ Believes her contributions are invisible — credit goes elsewhere
- ✓ Wants more money, a clearer path to promotion
- ✓ Feels micromanaged; not trusted to do her job
- ✓ Has considered leaving but hasn't said so formally

Volunteer 2: The Manager

"Alex" · Marketing Manager, 8 years

Alex's 1:1 with HR reveals:

- ✓ Believes Jordan has real performance gaps — missed deadlines, incomplete work
- ✓ Has tried to give feedback; Jordan becomes defensive
- ✓ Frustrated that Jordan isn't asking for help when she's stuck
- ✓ Feels his team's results are suffering because of the dynamic
- ✓ Open to a reset — but wants accountability, not just feelings

Workplace Conflict Resolution Agreement

Entered into voluntarily by the parties identified below, facilitated by a designated mediator with the support of Human Resources. The purpose of this Agreement is to resolve the workplace conflict identified herein and to establish a framework for a positive working relationship going forward.

1. Parties to the Agreement

Agreement Date

Mediator Name

HR Representative

EMPLOYEE A

Full Name: _____

Job Title: _____

EMPLOYEE B

Full Name: _____

Job Title: _____

2. Purpose

This agreement reflects the commitments made during our conflict resolution session to:

e.g., improve day-to-day working interactions, communication, and job performance effectiveness

3. Shared Goal

We agree that the goal moving forward is to:

e.g., forward-looking intentions from both parties — specific, measurable, agreed

4. Agreed Actions & Commitments

4.1 Commitments by Employee A — specific actions and behavioral changes:

4.2 Commitments by Employee B — specific actions and behavioral changes:

4.3 Joint Commitments — both parties agree to:

e.g., weekly check-ins every Friday at 1:30 pm · address concerns directly before escalating to HR · shared project tracking tool

5. Follow-Up & Monitoring

Follow-Up Date

Conducted By

Review Period *30 / 60 / 90 days*

Add'l Support

6. Non-Compliance

- Escalation to formal disciplinary procedures
- Additional mediation sessions as determined by HR
- Further investigation and corrective action
- Up to and including termination in serious or repeated cases

Nothing in this Agreement limits the organization's right to independent disciplinary action.

7. Signatures

By signing, each party confirms they participated voluntarily, understand the terms, and commit to upholding their obligations in good faith.

Employee A Signature:

Date:

Employee B Signature:

Date:

Mistakes HR Makes (Even With Good Intentions)

Knowing these will save you from the most common traps



Taking sides too early

Validating one person's story before hearing the other. Kills neutrality instantly.



Promising confidentiality you can't keep

If it becomes a formal complaint, you may have to act on what you know.



Skipping the follow-up

A reset without accountability drifts back to the original dynamic within weeks.



Rushing to resolution

Moving to a joint meeting before both parties are ready creates a worse outcome.



Letting managers self-report success

'They're fine now' isn't the same as actually checking with both employees.



Using HR as a weapon

When employees learn HR sides with who complains first, you get weaponized complaints.

When Early Resolution is NOT the Right Tool

Honest answers to the hardest question in this work

These situations require formal process — not a reset conversation:



Harassment, discrimination, or any allegation protected by law



Retaliation concerns



Safety threats or intimidating behavior



Situations where a power imbalance makes 'voluntary' resolution impossible



Repeat patterns that have already been informally addressed without improvement

Your Practical HR Conflict Toolkit



Conflict Triage Checklist

- How long has the tension existed?
- Have there been prior informal interventions?
- Is there a power differential between the parties?
- Are there any legal/protected-class concerns?
- Have performance issues surfaced as a result?
- Are both parties willing to engage?
- Has the manager/HR been perceived as neutral?

If you answer 'yes' to Q3 or Q4 — escalate or bring in outside help.



Opening Lines Cheat Sheet

- "I've heard there's been some tension. I wanted to check in before anything gets bigger."
- "I'm not here to decide what happened. I'm here to help you both find a way forward."
- "Help me understand how you've experienced the last few weeks."
- "What would a good working relationship look like from your perspective?"
- "Is there anything you'd want the other person to know — without it being a confrontation?"
- "What would it take for you to feel okay working together again?"

Tip: Pause after each question. Silence is productive — resist filling it.



Informal Documentation Log Template

- Date of awareness / referral:
- Parties involved (name, title, tenure):
- How HR became aware (manager referral / direct / observed):
- Nature of conflict (communication / workload / interpersonal):
- Steps taken (dates of individual meetings, joint session):
- Agreed next steps and follow-up date:
- Outcome: resolved / escalated / referred to outside provider

Keep this in a confidential file. Even informal action should be documented.

Sometimes HR Needs a Neutral — And That's Smart

Knowing when to call in outside support is a sign of excellent HR judgment



HR is conflicted out

If HR has a prior relationship with one party, has already been involved, or is perceived as aligned with management — a neutral third party removes the bias concern and protects HR's credibility on other matters.



Bandwidth and capacity

A thorough conflict resolution session takes a full day. When HR teams are stretched, outsourcing ensures the work gets the attention it deserves — without pulling HR from other priorities.



Liability and documentation

An outside facilitator with legal training conducts the session with an eye toward how it may be evaluated later. The employer can point to a structured, neutral, legally-informed process as evidence of good-faith action.



Seniority or power dynamics

When the conflict involves senior leaders, founders, or situations where employees may not speak freely with internal HR, a neutral outside party creates the psychological safety needed for real conversations.



Both parties prefer neutral ground

Employees are sometimes more willing to engage — and more willing to be honest — when the facilitator has no stake in the outcome and no ongoing relationship with either side.

What to Remember When You Walk Out



Conflict rarely announces itself. Learn the early signs and you'll act faster and smarter.



Early resolution isn't about being 'soft'. It's about being strategic and cost-effective.



A 30-minute reset conversation today beats weeks of investigation later.



Focus on creating the right space and listening. Most employees want to be heard.



Knowing when to bring in outside help is a sign of excellent HR judgment, not a gap in your skills.

You don't need a formal process to make a difference — you just need to show up early.

Early action is your superpower.

Questions? Let's keep the conversation going.

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