

**Keys to Conflict Resolution, Part II: Rejecting the “Personality Conflict” Shorthand**  
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*“It’s a personality conflict. We’ll never get along!”*  
*“She’s just the kind of person who pushes my buttons!”*

Every workplace experiences conflicts among personnel. Some conflicts are valuable, leading to collaborative and creative resolution of professional challenges. Many conflicts, however, become enduring and interpersonally poisonous, alienating co-workers from each other and from the agency mission, fragmenting teams into factions, and becoming increasingly toxic to general morale and productivity.

In the *May Advisor*, we looked at the pervasiveness of conflict in the workplace, and the time and financial burdens associated with conflicts that fester or become entrenched. We discussed the first *Key to Conflict Resolution – Separating the Topic from the Stake*. In this article, we address the risks posed by the common concept of the ‘personality conflict’, and identify ways to intervene for a positive outcome. This information may be useful to the person directly involved in the conflict, but is directed specifically at the supervisor or manager who may have to take a problem-solving facilitation role with the involved individuals.

“Personality conflict” is common conversational shorthand for the complexities of a poor relationship, so it’s not surprising many an employee will explain his or her difficulties with a fellow employee or supervisor with those words. But the savvy manager, seeking to resolve conflicts and restore cooperation and collaboration in the work-group, should recognize that the circularity of the “personality conflict” concept is a potential trap for all concerned. For example, Bob doesn’t like Paul “because we have a personality conflict”. Why do they have a personality conflict? “Because we’re just too different; we don’t get along!” Why don’t you get along? “Because...we have a personality conflict!” And so it goes, seemingly unsolvable and perpetual, and the frustrated supervisor or manager may be prone to ineffective shortcuts (“Just work it out!”), while the involved employees become increasingly polarized and their fellow employees increasingly uncomfortable.

The antidote is relatively simple, but requires an investment of unwavering persistence by the person facilitating resolution of the dispute:

- o Do not allow either party to use the “personality conflict” explanation without gently but firmly rejecting it.
- o Make it clear that “personality” is a label for the judgments we make about people based on what we observe them *doing* or *not doing*. Personality labels are umbrella terms for our assessments of others’ *behaviors*, but personality labels are too general to be helpful.
- o Emphasize that the conflict can and will be solved by examining specific changes that each party may request of the other. What, specifically, has each party done (or failed to do) that has contributed to the breach, and what can each party change in his or her *behavior* (not “personality”) to improve the relationship?

It is only this path that allows the manager-as-mediator to steer the conflict resolution process away from the murkiness and circularity of personal styles and preferences, and instead toward shared goals (mutually respectful and cooperative behavior, a more tolerable working

environment) and productive negotiation. Typically, the discussion will intermittently regress back to personality labels and generalizations (e.g., “He’s too much of a control-freak” or “She’s just unfriendly”). Each time, the facilitator should label the drift (“that’s a label, and it’s too general”) and steer the discussion back to specific behavioral incidents that require resolution and identified goals for an effective working relationship.

In many cases of conflict, effective resolution is greatly enhanced by use of the two *Keys* discussed to date: *Separating Topic from Stake* and *Rejecting the “Personality Conflict” Shorthand*. Some conflicts, however, will resist even the best in-house attempts at resolution. When that occurs, remember that C-SEAP is available as a source of skilled, neutral, non-binding, cost-free facilitation of conflict resolution between individuals or within teams. **To consult with a staff member on issues of workplace conflict, or any other workplace challenges, contact C-SEAP at 303-866-4314.**