

# Managing Conflict for Supervisor Success – Section 1

## An Ounce of Prevention: Establishing a Positive Workplace Culture



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In a healthy work environment, everyone works together to navigate conflict and resolve differences to find mutually successful outcomes. A positive and supportive workplace culture fosters constructive relationships, allows space for congeniality as well as difference, and goes a long way toward preventing destructive conflict. This is not a step-by-step how-to manual, but rather a buffet of possibilities for enhancing the culture that fits your workplace. Choose the ideas and activities that fit your personal style and that of your team. We encourage you to open up to things that may be uncomfortable and to be bold about exploring the unfamiliar.

We'll investigate three tips to create a positive workplace culture that may help keep you and your staff on an even keel.

- **Tip 1:** Define Civility for the Group
- **Tip 2:** Model the Right Behavior
- **Tip 3:** Foster Civility by Building Social Cohesion

## Tip 1: Define Civility for the Group

### What is civility?

The [Institute for Civility in Government](#) offers this definition:

*“Civility is about more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one’s preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements.”*

In any organization that embodies civility, there is an underlying agreement about civil behavior and an acceptance of accountability to others. This doesn’t happen by itself. One cannot assume that everyone follows some unwritten code of conduct and can readily embrace disagreement and find common ground. It’s important to clarify the norms of behavior that are the foundation of a civil workplace.

### Groups define their own civility norms

It’s common for a workplace to have prescribed norms of behavior. Often, these come from the top-down, written and declared by management. However, teams in an organization can also determine their own code for civil and congenial behavior. Doing so can help to transfer ownership to the group over the agreed-upon norms and induces group members to hold each other accountable for adhering to them.

The process of working with a group to define a code of civility takes time. You may want to introduce the concept gradually before conducting a group session to create the civility norms. It is likely to take more than one meeting for the group to discuss the variables, practice engaged behaviors, discuss thorny issues, and hammer out a mutually agreeable code. It is all a valuable learning process for the team.

### Read [Make Civility the Norm on Your Team](#)

Learn more about the advantages and process of working with your team to define a code of civility.

*“When establishing specific principles you want employees to follow in how they treat others, I’ve found that it’s beneficial to engage them in an ongoing conversation about what civility means. These discussions garner more support and empower employees to hold one another accountable for civil behavior.”* (Christine Porath, Harvard Business Review, January 02, 2018)

### Take Action

#### 1. Consider which group(s) to convene to create a code of civility.

- Is this something you want to coordinate across teams at the library or library system? Do you want to start with your work group and see where it might go from there?
- Once you’ve decided who will participate, think about how you will introduce the concepts and when/where you will convene the group.

#### 2. Assemble the resources to begin the conversation with your team.

- Consult the [Community Conversations Workbook](#), a collaboration of ALA and the Harwood Institute on how to lead group discussion on norms. Look to **pages 8–12** and use the tips on setting up and leading a community conversation to help you facilitate a staff conversation.

- Refer to the [Sample Civility Norms](#) to get the conversation started.
- Post the [Engaged Feedback Checklist](#) for everyone to see or provide it as a handout for group members.
  - See the Additional Resources at the end of this guide for assessment checklists that address diversity and inclusion.

### 3. Conduct the first group meeting to define a code of civility.

- The environment influences people’s mood and motivation. Access to natural light is most desirable but not always available. At a minimum, ensure that the space is clean, seating is arranged for equitable conversation and resources are at hand.
- Food is always a welcome addition to the environment. It doesn’t need to be fancy or expensive—just something to indicate that you are thinking of the group’s well-being.



Photo: Monterey Public Library Staff by [Monterey Public Library on Flickr CC BY 2.0](#)

#### *REFLECTIONS*

How did your team respond to defining their own code of civility? What worked well? Did you adequately address any obstacles you encountered? If so, how? What work still needs to be done?

#### **It’s an ongoing process**

Hopefully, you made good progress at your first meeting. Post the team’s code of civility in a prominent place (physical or virtual) and invite further comments. If needed, schedule more convenings to reach the objective of a code of civility that works for everyone on the team.

A code of civility is not set in stone; it is a living document. Provide check-in points with your team to review and potentially revise the code to adapt to changing conditions in the workplace.

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## Tip 2: Model the Right Behavior

Defining civility norms may begin with your team, but it's critical for the leaders in an organization to adopt and model the norm through your own behavior. It begins with examining yourself and the character of your leadership.

Notions about strong leadership have evolved to encompass “emotional intelligence.” Emotional intelligence is the capability to perceive emotions in oneself and others, and to manage and adjust one's emotions in response to circumstances, joining intelligence and empathy to achieve positive results. It's a refreshing recognition that one's self-awareness, empathy and social skills contribute to effective leadership. However, it's not necessarily easy to confront one's potentially complicated emotional self and acknowledge its impact on others.

### The Imperfect Leader

Twenty years ago, one would rarely describe a leader as vulnerable; in fact, it might seem like the least desirable quality for a leader. Brené Brown has totally refreshed the perspective on leadership with her research-based work on the value of embracing one's vulnerability.

Vulnerability is the courage to be imperfect and to show it. As a result of that courage, others open up to you and form deeper connections built on trust. Seek your own balance between the surface behavior that many people maintain at work and the genuine behavior that more truly reflects who you are.

Watch [The Power of Vulnerability](#) (20-minute TED talk, [transcript available](#))

Brené Brown presents a compelling case that opening up to your own insecurities leads to greater empathy and connection with the people around you—both in your personal life and in your workplace. It may feel challenging to listen to Brown. She freely acknowledges that vulnerability is not always comfortable and she relays her own rocky journey with humor and conviction.

### Take Action

- 1. Assess your emotional intelligence.** People in leadership positions are now being assessed for their emotional intelligence as much as for their topical or technical intelligence.
  - Take the [How Emotionally Intelligent Are You?](#) (Mind Tools) assessment to establish a baseline for your emotional intelligence.
  - Use the tips at the end of the assessment to establish goals for next steps.
- 2. Identify ways that you can amplify your emotional intelligence.** Read [Emotional Intelligence in Leadership](#) (Mind Tools) for an overview of the five key elements and some initial steps you can take to strengthen each:
  1. Self-awareness – first know your own emotions, strengths and weakness, and act out of humility.

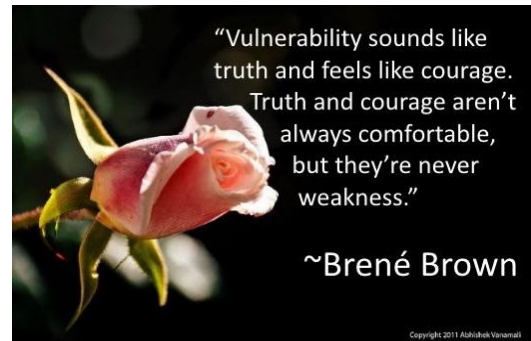


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2. Self-regulation – managing your emotional responses will help you keep situations under control and in balance.
3. Motivation – your self-motivation is a model for those around you, keeping a positive focus on your goals.
4. Empathy – being able to put yourself in someone else’s situation is critical to the positive support of your team; don’t confuse it with sympathy.
5. Social skills – being a good communicator is the key ingredient for connecting effectively with your team and coworkers.

**3. Read [Managing Your Emotions at Work](#)**

Negative emotions are unavoidable. However, once you have deeper understanding of what causes your negative emotions, you can interrupt the cycle and practice some responses to rise above them.

**4. Print out the [Leadership Manifesto](#) and post it somewhere you can refer to it often.**

*REFLECTIONS*

How does learning about vulnerability and emotional intelligence remove some of the “scariness” of the term for you? Where do you see an area of growth for your leadership?

### Tip 3: Foster Civility by Building Social Cohesion

With group norms as a solid foundation for nurturing a positive workplace environment, civility is augmented by social cohesion and an atmosphere of helpfulness. Work is inherently social, occupying large chunks of our lives. The more people feel part of a work community, the more they will contribute productively and creatively.

Watch [Forget the Pecking Order at Work](#) (16-minute TED talk, [transcript available](#))

Business leader Margaret Heffernan observes that it is social cohesion that drives people to do their best work. Yet many organizations are run according to what Heffernan calls "the super-chicken model," where high value is placed on star employees who outperform others. Highlighting and encouraging super-chickens actually impedes group reliance and trust. Groups that celebrate the super-chickens create a destructively competitive environment, which suppresses the productivity potential of the whole team.

- *“What drives helpfulness is people getting to know each other and it does not happen automatically.”*
- Successful work groups have three key characteristics:
  - High degree of social sensitivity to each other
  - Giving equal time to support each other
  - Having more women on the team (libraries have a leg up on this one!)

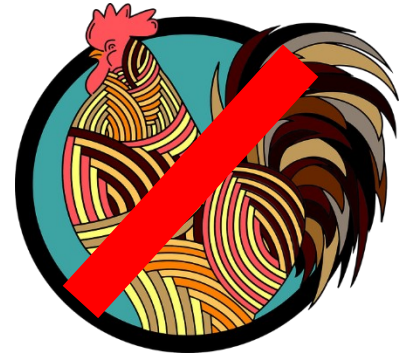


Image: Rooster by [OpenClipart-Vectors](#) on [Pixabay](#)

#### Take Action

There are many tactics for augmenting group reliance, trust and mutual helpfulness. From the three options summarized below, **choose at least one activity** to try with your team in order to increase social cohesion in your work group and reinforce the bonds of civility. Determine the best fit for the nature of your team, pursuing the activity that you think will have a positive outcome for the group. You may want to advance to other activities as the social connections among group members strengthen over time.

The complete activity can be found by clicking each link.

#### 1. [Cultivate strong internal customer service](#)

Library staff focus intently on providing excellent customer service to everyone who walks in their front doors. Providing that same level of friendly, alert and patient attention to everyone who works in the library is every bit as important. These short videos present scenarios to start a conversation with your team about how they can extend the courtesies of customer service to their coworkers and the implications of their behavior when they don't.

- People Come First: giving full attention to a coworker who asks for help
- Create a Supportive Environment: what staff need to feel like their colleagues really care for them
- Demonstrate Accountability: the importance of follow-through, respect and integrity

#### 2. [Build social capital at your workplace](#)

Social capital, or social cohesion, is the reliance and dependency that build trust among people. Sociologists coined the term from studying communities that demonstrated resilience in times of stress. It is a major ingredient of organizations that are robust and resilient. According to the MIT

research cited by Heffernan, the most successful work groups have a high degree of social sensitivity among the individuals. Social capital is built on codes of civility but goes well beyond. Civility establishes the basic norms for accepting differences and agreeing to work together equitably. Social capital pushes further into creating a sense of interpersonal connectedness and trust, from which the most effective collaboration and innovation spring. It compounds with time, and it takes time to nurture. In this document, consider the three areas of activities that you could initiate with your team to build social capital:

- Facilitate work sharing and helpfulness
- Facilitate casual connections at work
- Facilitate connections outside of work

### 3. [Practice vulnerability as a team](#)

Includes three activities that approach vulnerability gently and with good humor. They are tied together under a childhood theme, encouraging participants to open up a window into where they came from and what helped shape them into the person they are today. Sharing this kind of information can strengthen the bonds that build social capital and interpersonal connection. Building social capital takes time. Try these activities at the beginning or end of staff meetings over the course of several months.

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## Additional Resources

### Tip 1: Define Civility for the Group

- Choose and consult a social justice checklist that is most relevant to ensuring that your group's norms are inclusive of diversity. There is a lot packed into these checklists; you could easily dedicate an entire meeting (or more) to work through either of them.
  - [Racial Justice Assessment Tool](#)
  - [Assessing Our Organizations for LGBTQ Equality](#)

### Tip 2: Model the Right Behavior

- Read Brené Brown's book: [Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead](#)
- Try another [Emotional Intelligence Self-Assessment](#); this one from [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#) has an assessment/rating that generates a report of your score with suggestions for improvement.
- [What Self-Awareness Really Is](#) includes a graphic of four archetypes of self-awareness.

### Tip 3: Foster Civility by Building Social Cohesion

- WebJunction webinar, [Civility Goes Viral: A New Approach for a New Era](#)