



# The FSAP Update

a newsletter from the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program

Fall, 2008

## Resolving Coworker Conflicts

*The Faculty and Staff Assistance Program is located on the ground floor of University Health Services, 150 Infirmery Way. Hours are by appointment, Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 5 p.m. For information or an appointment, call (413) 545-0350.*

### FSAP Online

Visit the FSAP website, [www.umass.edu/uhs/services/fsap](http://www.umass.edu/uhs/services/fsap), for more information, news and resources.

**C**oworker conflicts can be one of the most difficult forms of workplace stress. Understanding the nature of conflict, examining myths and learning simple resolution skills can reduce conflicts and their negative toll.

If workplace or personal issues are on your mind, the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program (FSAP) can help.

Services are free and confidential for employees of UMass Amherst and the UMass Five College Federal Credit Union. Beginning November 1, 2008, members of the Graduate Employee Organization at UMass Amherst are also eligible.

### The Nature of Conflict

Workplace conflicts naturally emerge from the incompatible or opposing needs, wishes, external demands, or perceived demands of others. Conflict between coworkers can be visible in the work environment or stay hidden from others. Conflicts frequently grow worse without resolution and can be costly if they appear irreconcilable.



Although often stressful, conflict at work is normal. When managed and controlled, conflict in the workplace is beneficial because it can stimulate change and discovery, and increase productivity. Understanding accepted principles about conflict in the workplace can help you feel less victimized by it and more in control of its outcome.

### Myths About Workplace Conflict

- **Myth #1: Conflict is bad.** In the workplace, conflict isn't inherently bad; it's usually a symptom, not a problem. Conflict is a signal to do something to manage differences. What follows is a new outcome toward the goal of seeking harmony in the workplace and improving productivity.
- **Myth #2: Conflict is win-lose.** Conflict is often mistakenly viewed as an undesirable contest of wills and determination, where one person wins and the other loses. This view reduces the potential benefits of conflict and can make it worse.
- **Myth #3: Only bad employees cause conflict.** Difficult employees may contribute to conflict, but most workplace conflicts are between productive, dedicated employees. Problems in resolving conflicts, and inadequate approaches to conflict resolution, contribute to the belief that conflict must be a disciplinary matter.





## Early Intervention is Key

Because conflicts have the potential of becoming crises, early intervention is important. Once a crisis exists, attitudes of those in conflict become rigid. Termination of the relationship becomes the goal and the risk of physical violence may exist. Consider these keys to conflict resolution:

- **Expect conflicts:** Decide that conflicts will occasionally emerge in the course of human relationships. Don't fear conflict; rather, learn to spot its symptoms early and see opportunity in the resolution of conflict.
- **Practice preventative maintenance:** "Don't let a tree grow between you and a coworker." Practice talking about your relationship with your coworker. Don't withdraw, avoid, or take the simplistic view that your coworker is a bad person. These are defense mechanisms that prevent conflict resolution.
- **Frequently discuss four conflict parameters:** Ask, "Do we have any concerns about: 1) communication between ourselves, our team or our supervisor; 2) our roles and duties; 3) needs and resources for doing our job; 4) the work environment – customer stress, politics in the organization or expectations of our work unit." Ask what contributes to conflicts in these areas. Make honesty a tradition and tool for conflict resolution. Model openness and reward it if you're a manager or team leader. Seek solutions to identified problems and follow up.
- **Get leverage on yourself:** When conflict between you and a coworker appears without resolution, it's time to get leverage. Ask to be held accountable for resolving the conflict. This brings your performance evaluation into the equation, but without taking away your responsibility for resolving conflict. This is hard to do, but remarkable change can happen when you're held to task.



		<h2>CONGRATULATIONS to our flag contest winners</h2> <p><i>Ruth Allis, Microbiology</i>  <i>Joseph Hession, Administration &amp; Finance</i>  <i>Peter McKay, Dean of Students Office</i></p> <p><i>They were the first three to correctly identify that the pair of flags in the spring 2008 FSAP newsletter represent the letters 'N' and 'C', which combined indicate distress, while the other four flags spell out 'FSAP'.</i></p>



## Faculty and Staff Assistance Program

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