Conflict is a normal part of working with other people. If it is identified early and resolved effectively, it can be an engine for productivity and improvement. If it is left unresolved, the damage it can cause—both professional and personal—can be significant.

When we think about conflict in the lab setting, we tend to apply the label to anything unpleasant that gets in the way of doing research. However, simple disagreements in the lab do not qualify as “true” conflicts, although they can be challenging to resolve. Rather, conflict requires an ingredient that the Austrian economist and conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl defines this way: At least one of the parties involved has to be experiencing an emotion that is unpleasant for them. Scientists, like many professionals, tend to work in environments where the display or mention of emotion is considered unprofessional. But Glasl and others found that to resolve a conflict, the emotions need to be addressed. A solution that only solves the issue analytically will mean the conflict bubbles up again at some point—as we’ve all experienced, even if only in the form of sharp exchanges during lab meetings.

**Conflict in the Lab—It’s Not All Bad News**

In our EMBO Laboratory Leadership workshops, when we first invite participants to think about conflict, most people associate it with stress, anxiety, a toxic atmosphere, or reduced productivity. Only when they scratch beneath the surface do they also realize that conflict forces people to think, be creative, clarify values, and use resources better. Even top-performing teams experience conflict.
from time to time, but their secret to success is in resolving it quickly and redirecting the energy generated to the group’s benefit.

Many people, scientists included, have a natural tendency to wait for conflict to go away. It’s a strategy that can work, although it’s not terribly effective for creating a productive research environment. In labs, this strategy can play out naturally, as two- and three-year research contracts mean that the people involved will likely move on. Waiting for a conflict to go away doesn’t make us bad people, although handling it well would make us better leaders. The truth is that conflict is a difficult thing to deal with, even with appropriate training, and many scientists don’t get that training until they’re already suffering in a challenging situation.

**Identify Conflict Early**

The good news is that we can develop our skills to notice and resolve conflict. So watch out for early signs! For example, these can include silence, palpable tension, aggressiveness, changes in habits, or ignoring social events. These signs are typical during the first three stages of a conflict’s development (see figure). Here, the group leader can still intervene to resolve the conflict. By the time people are clustering into different “sides” for lunch or coffee, we’ve reached stage 4 and outside intervention is needed, either from a respected colleague or a trained professional. By the time an article appears in a campus or local paper denigrating “the enemy,” or a hostile comment is dropped on PubPeer, or an embarrassing or impossible question is asked at a lab meeting or seminar, it’s too late for an external mediation. Now, someone with sufficient authority needs to intervene and arbitrate or impose a solution. For one of our workshop participants, the resolution was to split up the two warring parties, who had been sharing an office. To avoid the appearance of winners or losers, both had to move to new offices—just about manageable in a three-office group.

**Assess the Nature of the Conflict**

When managing a conflict, it’s helpful to identify its type and how it developed. Both will guide you to an appropriate intervention or resolution. You need to answer the questions, Who’s involved? What’s it about? Where and when does it appear? For example, are just two people involved, or have groups formed? Is it about shared resources or a difference of opinion? Have people stopped talking to each other, or are they shouting at each other? These questions are usually easily answered. But in our experience, you need to go much further back in the timeline than you might think to see how the conflict developed.

We usually start the timeline from the point the second party joined the lab. When developing the timeline we’re looking for major events, inside or outside the lab, that impacted the parties’ working relationship and their emotional states. With this more complete picture, the group leader often notices the current conflict has its roots in something several months or even years old—and when these roots are addressed, the current conflict resolves itself. One example of this was a case we worked on some years ago with a research group that had already reached conflict stage 4 and had divided into sides. When we started developing the conflict timeline in a facilitated meeting with the whole group, it turned out that the conflict and other poor behavior stemmed
Dealing with Conflict

Deal with It!
Whatever approach you take to conflict resolution—there are many models and methods—identifying and working to resolve conflict will be crucial to your research group’s success. How you specifically address a conflict will depend on who is involved, what the conflict is about, and what emotions are in play. It is not possible to offer a single recipe for success, but two good rules of thumb are: If the emotions are hot (i.e., people are angry and shouting), you will need to “cool” down those involved by controlling their interaction. If the emotions are cold (i.e., the conflict has gone on a long time and people have given up hope and thus feel depressed), you will need to “warm” up each party before getting them to engage each other in dialog.

One simple approach to cooling down hot conflicts is to bring the two people in conflict together in a controlled space and engage them in circular listening. This technique means that the first person speaks for as long as they need to and then, before the second person may reply, the second person must repeat back what he or she has heard the first person say. Once the first person is satisfied that he or she has been heard, then the second person may speak while the first person listens and repeats, and so on.

Conversely, to warm up people in a cold conflict, you will need to meet them one-on-one, listen to their perspectives, needs and feelings, and reassure them that you can help resolve the conflict. Once they are optimistic that engaging with the other party will be constructive and worthwhile, then you can bring them together, as described above for hot conflicts. Of course, these approaches are for conflicts at fairly early stages of Glasl’s model and you must be seen as a totally neutral party to mediate in this way. More serious, challenging conflicts, or conflicts where you are seen to be “on a side,” will require professional training or even professional intervention to resolve.

We will leave you with a cautionary tale from our experience of a postdoc who started skipping his regular one-on-one meetings with the group leader, who let it slide. Several months later, the postdoc, in desperate need of a publication, attempted to publish without the group leader’s permission, leading to a serious conflict. If the group leader had noticed the early signs—avoidance—and addressed them immediately, the wasted energy of the publication drama could have been circumvented.

Be reassured that conflict is normal in all working environments, but know that the teams who succeed are those that deal with conflict properly. To do otherwise invites an unpleasant atmosphere, unhappy staff—including you—and, you might think worst of all, getting less research done.

Note
The information in this article is drawn from the EMBO Laboratory Leadership course. If you are interested in the course and how it can help you get the best from yourself, your team, and your research, visit http://lab-management.embo.org. The authors are grateful to Henrique Blatz (Leadership Sculptor) for her illustration of Glasl’s conflict model.

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