CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

EXPERT ADVICE FOR RESOLVING WORKPLACE DISCORD

2026 | ISSUE 3

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Are You an Arsonist or a Firefighter?

The metaphor of conflict as fire is apt. A spark landing on a combustible material results in flames. When this sequence happens outside the rock circle of a fire pit, or when a neglected candle burns down to the table, we instinctively neutralize the threat with a bucket of water, a blanket, or an extinguisher.

So why do we often add kindling when we experience a flammable interpersonal situation (e.g., opposing goals, different work styles, personality clashes)? The fuel might be a sarcastic response, a raised voice, or complaints about the other person. Stick after stick, we pile more on the bonfire until—like many In-Accord clients—we wonder, "How did it get this hot?"

What Firefighters Do Differently

While we can imagine conflict as a wildfire that spreads, embedded in the analogy is the antidote; instead, we can choose to smother it.

Here's an idea to hang on the wall under a large red arrow labeled "Extinguisher": Disarm by agreeing.

In my 33 years as a professional mediator watching people work through challenging interpersonal conflicts,

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the most consistently successful participants are those who demonstrate the ability to highlight points of agreement, demonstrate an understanding of the other, or convey empathy.

To turn theory into practice, imagine the other person says, "You never listen to my input! I don't even know why I bother telling you my ideas anymore."

Arsonist: "That's ridiculous. What a typical overreaction on your part! Just last week I…"

Firefighter: "I can see your point of view based on how the reorganization is proceeding. Your team did put a lot of thoughtful work into recommendations that didn't make it into the final plan…"

> ***Every effort you make to starve the conflict fire of fuel is powerful. It disarms, disrupts escalatory momentum, and redirects the discussion towards resolution.***

Starve the Fire

Every effort you make to starve the conflict fire of fuel is powerful. It is also ultimately in your self-interest because it disarms, disrupts escalatory momentum, and redirects the discussion towards resolution. Refusing to feed the fire isn't about refraining from sharing your point of view and giving up on trying to get what you need in a given conflict. Instead, this approach recognizes that it is easier for you to bring up difficult topics, requests, or critiques when you're doing so in an environment that's drenched in water rather than gasoline.

Next time someone drops a lighted match into a heated situation, extinguish it with understanding instead of fanning the flames. ❧





Need help putting out a fire in your organization?

In-Accord helps workplaces address conflict before it spreads.

Call us! (503) 723-9982

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