

Conflict Resolution between Supervisors & Supervisees

Process Summary

Informal Stage

The Informal Stage includes three steps:

1. Informal Dialogue should take place normally within 3 weeks
Many issues can be best resolved quickly and informally through discussion between the doctoral researcher and their supervisor or other relevant parties. Supervisors and doctoral researchers are advised first to initiate a dialogue to discuss concerns or misunderstandings. If the PGR is unsure to or is unwilling to speak to their supervisor, they should contact their Senior Tutor for Research (STR). This should normally happen within 3 weeks, and they should contact the STR if they are unsure on how to do this. The Doctoral College can also support the STR as needed.
2. Facilitated Conversation¹
A facilitated conversation is an informal method to help prevent issues becoming more deep-seated and escalating. They are often used to restore interpersonal relationships. The guide at the following link gives further details: [Facilitated Conversation Guide](#).
3. Changing supervisory arrangements
If the respective parties fail to resolve the issue through informal dialogue or facilitated conversation, they may refer the issue to the STR for consideration of a supervisory change.

Formal Stage

If the informal stage does not lead to a satisfactory resolution, the supervisors and doctoral researchers can explore the formal stage of conflict resolution. This includes engaging with the [Grievance procedure](#) for supervisors and/or the [Student Complaints process](#) for doctoral researchers.

Doctoral researchers can seek advice from the [Student Union](#) prior to engaging with the formal process.

¹ McGill University, *Resolving Conflict*, 'Supervision: Graduate and Postdoctoral Support', accessed on the 19th March 2025: <https://www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision/supervisors/resolving-conflict>

Process Steps in Detail

Step 1: Informal Dialogue

Please see above.

Step 2: Facilitated Conversation

The purpose of the conversation is to support a productive dialogue between two individuals, and it is likely to be most appropriate in the early stages of a situation in which an individual may be trying to resolve a problem but cannot quite work out the best way to move forward. The conversation is voluntary and designed to address issues positively and constructively. It requires appointing an independent individual to help the parties develop a shared understanding of the conflict and work towards building a practical and lasting resolution. The facilitator, in this case the STR or equivalent, is entirely independent and has no advisory or decision-making remit. This means that when an STR is part of the supervisory team, they should seek another STR (or equivalent) to step in and take the role of the independent chair. The STR's (or equivalent) role is to chair the meeting and facilitate individuals reaching a shared understanding, and it is key to consider any conflict of interest that could affect their position as an independent chair.

Also, both sides must agree to participate in the discussion without feeling under pressure to pursue this route.

A facilitated conversation should end with a verbal commitment whereby the individuals involved agree to make specific changes in order to resolve the issue. It is recommended that both parties receive a written confirmation of the agreed actions/discussion points.

Objectives

The objectives of this approach are threefold:

- to encourage doctoral researchers and supervisors to raise matters of concern informally at the earliest possible stage, thereby avoiding unnecessary stress.
- to avoid the lasting, and sometimes irretrievable, damage that can be caused to working relationships by delaying action until matters become more serious and positions entrenched.
- to reduce the incidence of formal complaints.

The Conversation²

The facilitated conversation provides speaking time, an opportunity to discuss issues constructively and mutually agree next steps. This is the recommended structure of the meeting:

1. Agree ground rules to establish a respectful environment: This includes mutual respect, courtesy, listening and any others suggested. Ensure everyone agrees to these ground rules.
2. Experience of situation: Both parties have uninterrupted talk time (maximum of ten minutes each).
 - During this time, they outline what the issues are and the impact on them (for instance, how they feel about the situation, their role in it, and how other's behaviours have led them to feeling).
 - The facilitator will summarise when both have finished talking and ask, if necessary, about the impact/consequences on both individuals.

² [Facilitated Conversation Guide](#), Develop@City: Workplace Mediation.

3. Core issues: Both parties can talk to each other about what they feel are the key issues. Each issue should be explored with curiosity with a view of finding a solution.
4. Problem solving: When all the issues have been discussed, both individuals should focus on problem-solving and agreeing solutions and identifying actions that each person will take.
 - As this is not mediation, written contracts are not necessary, but a simplified summary and any actions may be useful for individuals for their personal growth and as a reminder of what was discussed.
5. Close: The facilitator checks how both individuals are feeling and gains clarity about next steps. Follow up actions and timescales are agreed.

Important: It is recommended to take a longer break after this conversation before going back to work as these conversations can be challenging.

Step 3: Changing Supervisor(s)

Although there are many reasons why a supervisor and supervisee may no longer wish to work together (for example, evolving research interests or preference in supervisory style), changing supervisor(s) should be considered the last resort. If after careful consideration, this is considered the best available path, the supervisor and their supervisee should consider the possibility of approaching other faculty members who may be able to supervise the respective supervisee in the School/Department. Supervisors should consult with the STR for further assistance when seeking to identify a new supervisor for their doctoral researcher. Depending on what stage the researcher is in the programme, switching supervisors might necessitate altering the research topic or plan. Throughout this transition, it is vital to keep all relevant parties updated on the progressing actions. The process should be finalised as swiftly as possible to minimise any delays in research activities and related issues. Finally, it is important to ensure that the STR communicates to the student via email that they need to set up a meeting with the new supervisory team to ensure that clear research goals are set up and review the student's progress within three months of the supervisory change.

Related Documents/Resources

- [Early Resolution Conversation Guide](#)
- [Non-Violent Communication Handout](#)
- [How to Resolve Conflicts \(LinkedIn Course\)](#)
- [Nano Tips for Managing across Cultures](#)