

Conflict Management Strategy Revealed

By Dennis Sommer

Conflict is inevitable. No matter where you work, sooner or later you're going to find yourself in a disagreement with someone. We've all heard of disputes that erupt into expensive and divisive lawsuits. A simple personality conflict between two members of a team can cripple productivity and in the end leave the entire team feeling angry and betrayed. The following strategy describes a successful approach to resolving conflict.

We're taught at an early age to defer to someone else, to take our problems to the teacher, to mom and dad, to the police. At the same time, trying to address potential disputes before they arise with detailed policies of appropriate behavior is ultimately unsatisfying as well. The suggestion is that if we have enough rules, somehow things will be fair and everyone will be treated fairly. Uniformity doesn't necessarily produce fairness, and rules can't address every real situation. For managers to assume they have dealt with an issue in the workplace because they have passed a rule or a policy is, at best, a naive assumption.

The question then, is not "How can we avoid conflict?" but "How can we manage it?" If conflict can't be eliminated, we can at least deal with it constructively.

Conflicts between work employees can spring from any number of sources; miscommunication, unmet expectations, feelings that one's contributions have not been acknowledged. Conflicts and disputes seldom have a simple cause, but they arise when people choose to make their differences into disagreements.

If conflict is the result of individual choices, managers that want to successfully manage and resolve conflicts must create an environment where employees can make the right choices. The optimum strategy depends on building the right group norms in the first place. If employees are open to differences effectively to reach good decisions, then employees will be able to express differences appropriately and effectively resolve them.

The following items must be addressed and managed to successfully manage conflict.

Be Comfortable Dealing With Conflict

Being open to disagreement is sometimes difficult. Most people are afraid of conflict. That's the reason for rules in the first place. But rules designed to eliminate conflict may allow situations to smolder and then erupt if employees do not have the opportunity to express their concerns. Much of the way you do that is not by trying to squelch the conflict and getting everybody to calm down, but by allowing everybody to voice their concerns. You can generally move people to a place where they are saying, "Okay, now what are we going to do about it?"

Acting quickly to air the issues is better psychologically for all the employees as well. People do not like to be embroiled in conflict or have disputes, so the quicker it's over with, the better for everyone and the faster you can move on.

Find The Source of the Conflict

The tendency to look to some superior authority to resolve disputes frequently leads to unsatisfactory conclusions. Thus, the ability of employees to solve problems close to the source, at the team level, will also contribute to a healthy conflict resolution process. For example, if a factory manager walks around a couple of times a day to inspect whether people are bypassing the safety goggles, you will get people trying to conceal what they are doing. On the other hand, if a coworker who is working down the line from you is the safety contact person, there is no hiding what you are doing. And when that person says, "Look, don't be a fool", it's much closer to the source. It's a whole different kind of interaction.

In addition, bringing in outside authority may too quickly turn the process into a fact finding investigation that puts everyone involved on the defensive. The person who made the allegation says, "Why are you looking at me?" And the person who's accused of inappropriate behavior says, "You're trying to get me fired." For these reasons, attempting to resolve disputes at the team level is more likely to lead to a constructive result.

Addressing the interests of the parties in conflict is also more likely to lead to a satisfying resolution. Very often people put things in positional terms, "I want him fired". With active listening, managers and dispute mediators can help move the disagreement away from demands and toward a discussion of each party's legitimate interests.

Lessons Learned

When employees are able to learn from the disagreement and apply lessons learned to new situations, they will be able to resolve those new situations more efficiently. This may be the toughest element to work with, especially on an organizational level. Most organizations have what can be thought of as serious learning disability. But on the team level the opportunity for learning may be less difficult. For example, you might have teams that have had a problem with unfair job promotion, so some people had more opportunity to qualify for higher pay increases. In those cases, where the conflict has been surfaced and then resolved and addressed by the team, there's a much higher chance that the next time somebody starts showing favoritism in those ways, the team will be able to say, "No, we dealt with this last year."

Conflict Do's

Practice some self recognition. Only rarely does a conflict arise without contributions from both parties. Very often people tend to project it, and say, "They made me do this". Employees should try to recognize when they are angry about a situation, and what their role in creating the situation really is.

Be careful about what is put in writing. Despite the advice of many lawyers, memos, letters, and emails can exacerbate and escalate the conflict.

Conflict Don'ts

Involve more people in the process than you need to. Gossip about a conflict can derail attempts to resolve it amicably.

Address the subject while you're angry. The resulting discussion probably won't be very constructive, and may have negative effects. Find an appropriate time to engage with the other person.

Summary

While conflict is inevitable, it doesn't have to be destructive. Management experts point out that you can't assume everyone is happy just because no complaints are being aired. Conflicts can seethe beneath the surface, working them out openly can create new opportunities for your employees.

The wonderful thing about dispute and conflict resolution is that when managed effectively, not only does it help to address many conflicts that can pull you down, but it liberates all sorts of energy. Conflicts constructively addressed not only avoid something that would have been otherwise festering and difficult, but they also usually lead to insights and opportunities that might not be seen otherwise.

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