



Conflict in the Workplace



“Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.”

Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and founder of Analytical Psychology (1875-1961)

“When you’re at the edge of a cliff, sometimes progress is a step backwards. ”

– Anon

“If you understood everything I said, you’d be me.”

Miles Davis, American jazz trumpeter (1926-1991)

There are not many certainties in the modern workplace. One of the few, however, is that there will be conflict.

No matter how harmonious your organisation may be, it contains human beings, and human beings have a tendency to clash. They just can’t help it, especially when they’re under pressure. People have different goals, they have different needs and in these challenging times, they most certainly have different moods.

Conflict can arise in many different forms, from quiet irritation to persistent disagreement to full-scale verbal or even physical fighting; but it is inevitable. Given this reality, there is a simple choice. The conflict can be addressed constructively, and therefore resolved, or it can be dealt with destructively, which will only prolong the misery.

The destructive route (which includes ignoring conflict) is disastrous both for individuals and organisations. Among employees it can lead to stress, anxiety and anger. For companies, it is a fast track to rapid turnover, rising absence and declining revenues.

By the same token, a constructive and positive approach to conflict can boost self-esteem and confidence, increase a sense of connection and creativity on both an individual and a team level, and lead eventually to a more satisfying, productive and peaceful working environment.

The cost of workplace conflict

Before we look at the causes and symptoms of workplace conflict, it's worth taking a moment to think about the impact that it has on business in this country. If you think that dealing with arguments in the office is a peripheral consideration, think again.

According to a global report released in late 2008 by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), some 370 million working days were lost in Britain the previous year due to poorly managed conflicts in the workplace. This cost British employers more than £24 billion.

"Workplace conflict is nothing new," said Robert McHenry, CEO of business psychology firm OPP, which co-authored

the report. "But in the context of the current economic downturn, businesses could see steep rises in conflict as workloads increase, budgets shrink and stress levels rise."

Worryingly, the report also revealed that some 55 percent of the UK workforce has never received any training in effective conflict management. So despite the huge magnitude of the problem, more than half of us have never been given any instruction in how to deal with it. Ill-equipped as we are, it comes as no surprise then that the vast majority of British workers (89 percent) have experienced workplace conflict that has escalated. And we wonder why we all feel so stressed!

Causes and levels of conflict

More often than not, a workplace conflict first comes to light in the form of a clash between two or more individuals. These disagreements can be driven by a range of individual factors, including poor interpersonal skills, competing needs and goals, conflicting values, personal problems outside of work, low self-esteem and mental health problems.

Experts in mediation and conflict resolution point out, however, that it is rarely that simple. Research shows that the difficulties of a few flawed individuals rarely constitute the real problem. The roots of unhealthy workplace conflict are almost always far more complex and systemic.

They include lack of clear and consistent leadership, poor internal communication, inadequate training opportunities, ineffective organizational systems, lack of clarity about roles and unrealistic expectations.

Along with the combination of different factors that can contribute to workplace conflict, there are also several different levels that can be experienced, ranging from minor disputes to full-blown confrontations. Workplace psychologist Tony Buon cites the following:

Discomfort. This is a situation where nothing is said, but there is a sense that things just don't feel right.

Incidents. Here an outward clash occurs, but there is no significant emotional response.

Misunderstandings. On this level, the different parties have begun to hold negative images of the other but it is still relatively easy to fix the dispute through information-sharing and open communication.

Tensions. Conflicts become increasingly difficult to resolve as one or more of the parties have started to form fixed beliefs and positions about the other person.

Crisis. At this final stage, trust has broken down and there is little opportunity for restoring a healthy working relationship. Extreme gestures are either contemplated or executed.

Buon writes: "Whilst a conflict may start at one end of this continuum involving behaviours that are seemingly minor or can reasonably be regarded as just a normal part of day-to-day working life, minor conflict situations have the potential to change ... into far more serious conflicts involving behaviours such as bullying or harassment and acts of retaliation, sabotage, physical assault or violence."

Buon, T. (2008) *Perspectives on Managing Workplace Conflict*. In *Employee Well-being Support: A Workplace Resource*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

"Negative" versus "positive" conflict

While actual violence may be a rare occurrence at the office, the numerous effects of failing to address conflict constructively are sadly a daily reality for many employees and managers alike. On an individual level, the negative

impact can include a loss of commitment to the job or the organisation, a mounting sense of frustration, feelings of isolation, loss of self esteem and a decrease in personal work performance and productivity.

This kind of stress can lead to a range of physical ailments, including insomnia, headaches and digestive problems. It can also lead to depression, which brings with it an inability to think clearly, emotional numbing and a sense of detachment and apathy.

On an organisational level, it can get really ugly. The turnover of employees increases, sickness and absence rises, a sense of team coherence is lost, productivity drops, profits fall, and what once may have seemed like a happy and motivated place to work feels dull and uninspiring.

Styles of handling conflict

In order to get to grips with the disputes that we face, we first need to understand that we all have our own particular style of handling conflict. In the 1970s, two experts in organisational dynamics – Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann – identified five main styles of dealing with conflict. While arguing that everyone has their own style, they also noted that different styles were useful in different situations. The five styles are:

Competing. People pursue their own needs at the expense of others. The goal is to win or defend a position. This approach is useful when quick decisive action is required and it works well in emergencies. It can, however, make people reluctant to disagree with you.

Accommodating. This is the opposite of competing and means neglecting your own concerns to satisfy those of another person. The goal is to yield. It is useful if one wants to learn from others and when harmony is important, but it can also deprive you of influence, respect and recognition.

Avoiding. The conflict is not addressed and therefore neither set of concerns is immediately pursued. The goal is to delay. This approach works with issues of minor importance or when it is important to let someone cool down. On the downside, it can be a waste of energy and forces people to walk on eggshells around you.

Compromising. Finding an immediate solution that is mutually acceptable and fulfils the needs of both parties

If this all looks a little depressing, the good news is that there is another way. “Positive conflict” may sound like a contradiction in terms, but if you are able to find a way of addressing disputes constructively, you will not only solve the underlying problems that have risen to the surface, you will also reap a range of associated benefits.

These include a deeper understanding of the situation at hand and a capacity to learn from past mistakes, increased group cohesion, stronger mutual respect, sharpened focus and enhanced productivity.

at least partially. It differs from collaborating in that some needs may need to be sacrificed in order to have others met. The goal is to find a middle ground. Compromising is useful for achieving a temporary settlement to complex issues, but longer term goals and values can get lost.

Collaborating. This involves working with the other person to find a solution that satisfies both sets of concerns. To achieve this, attention is given to finding out exactly what the needs of both parties are. The goal is to find a so-called win/win situation, which offers a creative solution to both parties. It is essential when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised, but less useful with more trivial problems.

We’re all capable of using all of these five modes, but most of us will lean more readily to some than to others. Thinking carefully about the range of options available can help us choose the most appropriate technique for handling any given situation.



Practical steps

Once you’ve identified the mode of conflict resolution that you think will offer the best fit, here are some simple steps towards tackling the dispute calmly and effectively.

Prepare well. Before you talk to the other person, think about the issue at stake. What exactly is upsetting you? Is there a

deeper problem underlying the apparent difficulty? Consider also what you would like to gain from the conversation. Make sure you have gathered all the relevant facts, and that you have checked that they are correct. Also make sure that you are not approaching someone while you are in the throes of anger. It is essential that you feel calm and collected.

Practical steps (cont'd)

Set the scene. Make sure both parties understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which can be best resolved through discussion and negotiation as opposed to aggression. Emphasise the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem and you want to hear what the other party has to say about their view of the situation.

Gather information. Remember, the initial goal is not to agree with what the other person is saying, it is to understand where they are coming from. Try to understand what the other person's motivations and goals are, and think about how your actions may be affecting those. Talk over the conflict in objective terms and ask whether it might be affecting work performance or the decision-making process. Try and identify the issue at stake clearly and avoid statements that blame the other person. Stick to how the situation makes you feel as opposed to focusing on what the other has done to you.

Listen actively. Restate, paraphrase and summarise what you are being told in order to be clear that you have grasped

what the other person is intending to convey. Don't spend the time they are talking thinking about what you are going to say next.

Identify the problem. This may sound obvious, but it is often the case that two parties to a conflict view the situation from very different angles. There can be no mutually acceptable solution until there is some agreement on the nature of the underlying dispute.

Brainstorm possible solutions. Before making a decision about the best way forward, it is essential to have all the options out on the table. Try and be as creative as possible here.

Negotiate a "win-win" solution. It is quite possible that you will have reached a mutually acceptable solution by this stage. If this has not happened, it becomes necessary to negotiate the most acceptable way forward to all the parties concerned. In an ideal situation, you will find that the other person wants what you are prepared to trade, and that you are prepared to give what the other person wants.

Mediation and training

If a dispute looks like it cannot be solved by the parties involved, then some kind of mediation may be called for. Mediation is effective in many cases, especially where conflict persists due to an unwillingness to address the situation, confusion over the nature of the problem or lack of skills in managing disagreement.

Long before disagreements erupt, the key for all organizations lies in training. According to the CIPD report, more than

two thirds (68 percent) of managers say they have had no formal training in managing conflict. At the same time, some 95 percent of employees cite conflict management as a critical leadership skill in today's organisations. So if you're struggling with conflict in your organisation, it could well be time to think about training. It could save your team.

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