Managing Conflict

Personal conflict occurs when two or more people have opposing attitudes or behaviors to a situation, issue or person.

In most conflicts, neither party is right or wrong; instead, different perceptions collide to create disagreement. Conflict is natural and it's up to you to respond to conflict situations quickly and professionally. Conflict can be very positive; if you deal with it openly, you can strengthen your work unit by correcting problems. Conflicting views give you a chance to learn more about yourself, explore views of others, and develop productive relationships. Clear and open communication is the cornerstone of successful conflict resolution.

"The attitude that conflict is always harmful is only a part of the story. This limiting belief sets us up to miss powerful opportunities to take advantage of the creative forces of conflict. To reap the fullest benefits from conflict, we have to change how we think about it.

Insights, inventions and innovations hardly ever come about when we are feeling satisfied and comfortable with the status quo.

Creative conflict is recognizable for its spirit of curiosity and mutual respect and its commitment to learning and finding the best solution or direction to take. When conflict is creative, interactions are characterized by questions and by a lot of listening to try to get to know and understand the other points of view, without necessarily having to agree with those views. Personal stakes, ego needs, and preferred positions are temporarily suspended so that people can listen deeply to try and hear the legitimate truths or core essence of other perspectives and incorporate these into a larger reframing of the needs being addressed." [Jagoda Perich-Anderson]

Conflict can cost the business and individuals much time, money and energy, if allowed to fester, so it is worthwhile knowing how to handle it to your, and the business' advantage.

There are various strategies we can choose from when in conflict situations (Howard Culbertson, Southern Nazarene University):

Forcing: using formal authority or other power that you possess to satisfy your concerns without regard to the concerns of the party that you are in conflict with. (win/lose).

Fundamental premise: Associates *"winning"* a conflict with competition
Strategic philosophy: When goals are extremely important, one must sometimes use power to win
When to use:
- When you know you are right
- When time is short and a quick decision is needed
- When a strong personality is trying to steamroller you and you don't want to be taken advantage of
- When you need to stand up for your rights

Drawbacks:
- Can escalate conflict
- Losers may retaliate

Accommodating: allowing the other party to satisfy their concerns while neglecting your own. (Lose/win).

Fundamental premise: Working toward a common purpose is more important than any of the peripheral concerns; the trauma of confronting differences may damage fragile relationships

Strategic philosophy: Appease others by downplaying conflict, thus protecting the relationship

When to use:
- When an issue is not as important to you as it is to the other person
- When you realise you are wrong
- When you are willing to let others learn by mistake
- When you know you cannot win
- When it is not the right time and you would prefer to simply build credit for the future
- When harmony is extremely important
- When what the parties have in common is a good deal more important than their differences

Drawbacks:
- One's own ideas don't get attention
- Credibility and influence can be lost

Avoiding: not paying attention to the conflict and not taking any action to resolve it. (No winners, no losers).

Fundamental premise: This isn't the right time or place to address this issue

Strategic philosophy: Avoids conflict by withdrawing, sidestepping, or postponing

When to use:
- When the conflict is small, and relationships are at stake
- When you're counting to ten to cool off
- When more important issues are pressing, and you feel you don't have time to deal with this particular one
- When you have no power and you see no chance of getting your concerns met
- When you are too emotionally involved and others around you can solve the conflict more successfully
- When more information is needed

Drawbacks:
- Important decisions may be made by default
- Postponing may make matters worse

Compromising: attempting to resolve a conflict by identifying a solution that is partially satisfactory to both parties, but completely satisfactory to neither. (Short-term win/win, long-term lose/lose).

Fundamental premise: Winning something while losing a little is OK

Strategic philosophy: Both ends are placed against the middle in an attempt to serve the *"common good"* while ensuring each person can maintain something of their original position

When to use:
- When people of equal status are equally committed to goals
- When time can be saved by reaching intermediate settlements on individual parts of complex issues
- When goals are moderately important

Drawbacks:
- Important values and long-term objectives can be derailed in the process
- May not work if initial demands are too great
- Can spawn cynicism, especially if there's no commitment to honour the compromise solutions

Managing Conflict - Handout
www.clarenormancoachingassociates.com

Collaborating: cooperating with the other party to understand their concerns and expressing your own concerns in an effort to find a mutually and completely satisfactory solution (Win-win).

Fundamental premise: Teamwork and cooperation help everyone achieve their goals while also maintaining relationships
Strategic philosophy: The process of working through differences will lead to creative solutions that will satisfy both parties' concerns
When to use:
- When there is a high level of trust
- When you don't want to have full responsibility
- When you want others to also have "ownership" of solutions
- When the people involved are willing to change their thinking as more information is found and new options are suggested
- When you need to work through animosity and hard feelings

Drawbacks:
- The process takes lots of time and energy
- Some may take advantage of other people's trust and openness

The ideal way to resolve conflict is through collaboration, which is outlined below.

Execution Steps

To manage conflict effectively you must be a skilled communicator. That includes creating an open communication environment in your team by encouraging employees to talk about work issues. Listening to employee concerns will foster an open environment. Make sure you really understand what employees are saying by asking questions and focusing on their perception of the problem.

The three steps of **Managing Conflict** are explained in more detail below. This model has been proven to work in practice, and each step is vital, though some may take greater importance than others, depending on what you are trying to enable the individual to do.

- Step One: Recognizing conflict
- Step Two: Looking into the situation; Letting everyone be heard
- Step Three: Appraising

Step One – Recognising Conflict

- **Primary participants:**
  - Supervisor
- **Inputs:**

  - To handle conflict, you have to spot it.

- **Outputs:**
  - Conflict identified.

Managing Conflict - Handout

Description of Processing:

- o Supervisor detects conflict before it escalates too far. To do this, the supervisor needs to stay aware of what is going on within the team, and between the team and others.
- o Decide whether it merits your attention (some conflicts will sort themselves out without you).
  - ▪ What is the severity of the conflict? Is this a minor, short-term disagreement between individuals, that they could solve on their own; or is this conflict that risks dragging on into the long-term if not resolved? Is the individual slightly upset, and will likely work through the emotions, or does the anguish run deeper for them?
  - ▪ What is the business risk associated with the conflict? For example, will the business lose money or fail to achieve its targets as a result of the conflict?; will individuals leave – physically, or psychologically check out?
  - ▪ What is the depth of angst that this conflict is causing to your people?
- o If it merits your attention, don't ignore it. Early action saves time and stress later.
- **Suggested Elapsed Time:** N/A

Step Two – Looking into the situation; letting everyone be heard

Your role is to find out the real cause of the conflict (not the symptoms), who is involved, what the key issue is and what its actual and potential effects are. Don't take sides. Encourage the people concerned to examine the interests behind their positions and to create a climate of exchange so that the parties can deal with each other more constructively next time.

During this stage, Stay assertive:

- Acknowledge the views and rights of all parties

- Encourage the parties to find the causes of the conflict – and the solutions to it

- Try to make sure that opinions and thoughts are expressed honestly and openly

  - **Primary participants:**
    - o Supervisor
    - o Involved parties
  - **Inputs:**
    - o The facts.
    - o The feelings.
  - **Outputs:**
    - o Objective picture of the current reality and context surrounding the conflict.
    - o Options for the way forward.
  - **Description of Processing:**

    - o The supervisor uses a collaborative approach with the involved parties such that:

      - ▪ Person 1 explains his/her point of view.

        - Who is involved?

        - What is the issue?

Managing Conflict - Handout

- What is the cause of the issue? (you may need to use one of a number of tools to help people to identify underlying causes, for example fish bone analysis, root cause analysis, 5-why analysis – for more information, see [Facilitation Handbook](#))
- What is the impact of this issue on him or her and on the business?
- How does he/she feel about what's happening?
- What is his/her underlying need? (The goal of conflict resolution is not to decide which person is right or wrong; the goal is to reach a solution that everyone can live with. Looking first for needs, rather than solutions, is a powerful tool for generating win/win options. To discover needs, you must try to find out why people want the solutions they initially proposed. Once you understand the advantages their solutions have for them, you have discovered their needs.)

- Person 2 paraphrases Person 1's point of view to Person 1's satisfaction.
- Person 2 explains his/her point of view as above.
- Person 1 paraphrases Person 2's point of view to Person 2's satisfaction.
- Both parties identify a common outcome that they both want.
- Both people work together to determine alternatives.
- Both people agree on the best alternative.
- Both people evaluate the selected alternative once it is implemented.
  - o The supervisor should make sure that the people stick to the above structure, in order to really understand the other's point of view, before giving their own point of view

- **Suggested Elapsed Time:**

Depends on extent of the issue.

Step Three– Appraising

This step enables all involved parties to learn from the conflict situation and move on. Appraise the way the conflict was handled to see what you might do the same or differently next time.

- **Primary participants:**
  - o Supervisor
  - o Involved parties
- **Inputs:**
  - o Conflict resolved
- **Outputs:**
  - o Plusses and deltas for handling conflicts in future
- **Description of Processing:**
  - o Supervisor prompts the involved parties to reflect together, such that they learned from this conflict experience. The supervisor may use questions such as:

    - ▪ What did we do well in this instance that you would want to repeat?

- How can you avoid similar conflicts in future?
- Should conflict arise, how could you handle a similar situation better?

Suggested Elapsed Time: 15 minutes

Dealing with Anger

When you meet with someone who is angry, you can use the tools of effective listening to help defuse this anger. Nevertheless, when anger is directed at you, it is much more difficult to respond definitively, because your own emotions are usually involved.

To effectively defuse anger, keep in mind the needs of the angry speaker:

- **To vent**. An angry person needs to let off steam and release the anger that may have been brewing for a long time use your communication skills to allow the person to do this.
- **To get the listener's attention**. An angry person wants to know that you are paying attention use your body language to show this.
- **To be heard**. An angry person wants someone to listen to her point of view acknowledge the feelings you hear so that the speaker knows you appreciate how angry she is.
- **To be understood**. An angry person wants someone to appreciate how she feels try to empathize with her experience so that she feels you understand the situation and acknowledge her right to feel the way she does.

  When you're listening to an angry person:

- **Be attentive and patient**. Keep in mind that she will become less angry as you let her express herself.
- **Be sincere**. Empathy and validation must be both honest and genuine.
- **Be calm**. Try to remove your own emotions from the discussion. Remember that an angry person may say inflammatory things in the heat of the moment, but you do not have to react angrily.

Managing Conflict - Handout
www.clarenormancoachingassociates.com