

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Conflict And Resolution In The Workplace

Misunderstandings and the tensions that result are inevitable. However, if they occur in the workplace and go unresolved they often result in stress, hostility and wasted resources. Eventually unresolved workplace conflict has a negative impact on the bottom line of a company. It is a time-consuming problem for managers and a source of job dissatisfaction for employees.

Workplace conflicts can result from limitation of resources, personality clashes, miscommunication, perceptions of hidden agendas, dirty politics and backbiting (real or perceived), or disagreement about in the direction and goals of the company. When examined closely, workplace conflict is often the result of a significant disagreement over goals or needs of different employees, and behaviors such as hostility, avoidance, gossip and the like. Unresolved workplace conflict may result in a drop in productivity and creativity and innovation are significantly damaged.

The traditional view was that all conflict at work is bad. More recently the human relations view has replaced the traditional view in that conflict is considered natural and inevitable. If any enterprise involves people, there will be conflict. However, managed properly, by both leaders and by employees, conflict can become a positive force and actually result in improved performance of the group.

Conflict can be either functional or dysfunctional. Conflicts that supports the goals of the team or organization are functional and not only may be accepted, but actually encouraged. For example having sales teams compete for targets in different territories can boost company performance and profits. Dysfunctional conflicts are those that hinder or damage achieving company goals. The most common example would be having people who need to work together cooperatively compete for a limited pool of money for raises or having the X-ray department compete with surgery for profit levels. The X-ray techs need the surgeons and the surgeons need the X-rays so conflict is not functional.

In the workplace three types of conflict occur:

- Relationship conflict
- Task conflict
- Process conflict

Relationship conflict focuses on interpersonal relationships. Such conflicts are often very nasty and almost always do significant damage. Task conflicts are about what the work goals should be and about achieving those goals. If properly managed this kind of conflict can help the group perform better. Process conflict is about the best way to get the work done. Again when properly managed this kind of conflict can be productive.

How easily conflicts can be resolved depends greatly on the intentions of the parties to the conflict. These distinctions can help:

Competing - There is a winner and a loser when there is competition. It is based on a desire one's own interest regardless of the impact on the other party. For example in an auto shop having repair teams compete for service time and quality of work. The company can win with such competition. The teams do not need each other.

Collaborative - Involves an effort to satisfy at least some of the desires of all sides so all get something. If the parties are willing to let the other party win something cooperation is possible. For example when

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department heads agree to a series of conferences to create a joint solution to a problem rather than compete for their own solution to win.

Compromising - If each party is willing to give up some part of what they want and to settle for less than all they want, meeting somewhere in the middle compromise is possible. For example, when a person decides to accept less of a raise to resolve a difference over a salary increase.

Avoiding - A conflict can be resolved by one party simply withdrawing or suppressing the conflict. For example one party may decide not to submit an alternative proposal for the team project to avoid conflict.

Accommodating - If one party is willing to place the opponent's interests above their own and appease the other person conflict can be resolved. For example, when accepts another person's goals for the team and supports the goal in spite of reservations.

While some strategies for resolving conflicts are preferable to others, not all strategies work equally well for all conflicts. There is no single strategy that always works best for resolving conflicts in the workplace or at home. Rather, the optimal resolution method will have to take into account many different factors and be a good fit to the context of the conflict. Supervisors and employees must each be flexible in playing out their respective roles in managing differences and avoiding damage from dysfunctional conflict.