

Reference document

Conflict management



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Managing conflict in the workplace

Introduction

The day-to-day activities of employees in an organization essentially rely on interpersonal communications. In an environment where communication is frank and well established and where information flows freely, conflict occurs less frequently. Differences may be based on past experiences, on messages that are implied but left unsaid. Today, employees and managers are expected to display good interpersonal skills and a significant degree of openness when confronted by difficult situations in the workplace.

Conflict continues to be a source of stress that shouldn't be underestimated, as well as a demotivating force. Managers are inevitably involved in its resolution, whether closely or at arm's length. Conflict arises when colleagues disagree on basic issues or when friction is created by relational problems between individuals or groups.

Conflict management requires an ability to recognize situations that may result in conflict and react in a way that is of benefit to the organization and the parties. The origins of conflict may cause the organization to redefine certain management and work organization methods. Conflict management requires active listening skills.

Types of conflict

Inherent conflict

An inherent conflict is a fundamental disagreement with regard to the goals sought or the means of achieving them. People who work together, day after day, sooner or later encounter differences. For example, consider a sales team vs. an operations team. If daily conflicts are not effectively resolved, they can degenerate into an emotional conflict.

Emotional conflict

Emotional conflict results from relational problems which are manifested by various feelings such as anger, mistrust, animosity, fear and spite. We often come across the expression "personality conflict," which also describes a form of emotional conflict. The energy expended as a result of conflict of this type quite often distracts people from their professional priorities. The organizational environment, i.e. a highly competitive situation with more frequent restructuring, staff reductions, etc., unfortunately leads to more times in which the boss's "firmness" may result in emotional conflicts.

A new conflict: work-life balance

We will just mention it in passing here, but work-life balance is a hot topic. The expectations of employees within the organization differ from the expectations of them in their personal life. Employees must contend with scheduling conflicts, role overlapping, difficulty adjusting, etc. Employers fairly often use various items in their tool kit (shorter work schedule, teleworking, etc.) to "treat" this complex problem by alleviating it.

Phases of conflict

It is important to remember that unresolved conflict builds up and leads to other phases of conflict.

Phase 1: Pre-conflict issues

The pre-conflict issues are the conditions likely to result in a new conflict. Obviously, in a perfect world, the conflict would be dealt with once and for all. However, managers are often unaware of the pre-conflict issues and not notice their symptoms. Moreover, when the symptoms are present, managers often decide to deny their existence or temporarily suppress them. Phase 2 begins when pre-conflict issues lead to an inherent conflict or an emotional one.

Phase 2: Perceived conflict

The conflict may be apparent only to the person who is perceiving it, and not to both parties involved. In order for a conflict to be resolved, both parties must become aware of its existence and feel compelled to act. When you are involved in conflict, you experience unpleasant tension that pushes you to act in order to obtain relief. At this stage, few objective signs are apparent to the manager. The conflict continues to be perceived as a feeling of tension between two individuals, as doubts concerning an individual's motivation, etc. The objective signs of conflict become apparent in the next phase.

Phase 3: Open conflict

The objective signs of conflict are now apparent to the manager and even to the entire team. This is the stage at which the individuals involved can and should resolve the conflict. The manager's actions focus on either eliminating the conflict or suppressing the apparent and objective signs. If we choose to suppress something that is obvious, the underlying conditions will remain. The conflict could worsen and lead to problems of the same type.

However, for managers, the temporary suppression of a conflict is often the best short-term solution while waiting for an opportunity in which to address the underlying causes.

Underlying causes of conflict

Conflict management starts by analyzing the causes of the problem.

Vertical conflict

Involves groups or individuals at different hierarchical levels. Includes issues with regard to performance, resources, results, turnarounds, etc.

Horizontal conflict

Involves groups or individuals at the same hierarchical level. Often occurs between two operational and functional units when they want to assume decision-making authority in a given situation such as hiring, firing, etc.

Role conflict

This fairly common form of conflict occurs when the job-related tasks are unclear or destabilizing. There may even be some overlapping of tasks between two positions (ambiguity of roles and responsibilities). Employees may find that their needs and values come into conflict with the expectations with regard to their role.

Interdependence in the work or production chain

Misunderstandings or disagreements sometimes arise between two groups that must work together to achieve a common goal. The risk of conflict increases in proportion to the closeness of the interdependence. An example of this would be the situation in a restaurant kitchen.

Lack of resources

Working relations are likely to deteriorate when resources are in short supply. This is especially true in times of budget cuts and staff layoffs.

Asymmetry of power or values

A discrepancy in hierarchical positions or between values.

An understanding of these factors will be used to determine the strategies for resolving problems often due to work organization methods. Therefore, before defining a conflict resolution strategy, managers must have a clear understanding of the reasons for the conflict, as many of them might cause the organization to make unanticipated changes.

Five direct conflict management strategies

Before presenting the strategies, we will define two concepts that influence them.

- **Degree of cooperation** refers to each party's willingness to be flexible.
- **Degree of self-affirmation** refers to each party's desire to assert its own interests.

Therefore, it may be easier to determine the most suitable strategy according to the degrees of cooperation and self-affirmation.

Accommodation

(High degree of cooperation and low degree of self-affirmation)

Give in to the opposing party. Smooth over differences to maintain a more superficial harmony.

Avoidance

(Low degree of cooperation and of self-affirmation)

Minimize differences. Avoid the issue. Shy away or demonstrate steadfast neutrality.

Problem resolution

(High degree of cooperation and of self-affirmation)

Try to achieve mutual satisfaction by tackling the causes of the conflict head-on. Get a clear understanding of the problem and come up with a solution acceptable to all parties.

Confrontation or coercion

(Low degree of cooperation and high degree of self-affirmation)

Actively object to the opposing party's wishes. Try to dominate in a winner/loser relationship or, through a position of authority, impose one's preferred solution.

Compromise

(Moderate degree of cooperation and of self-affirmation)

Ensure that both parties are partially satisfied. Try to come up with acceptable rather than optimal solutions, so that neither party loses or is fully satisfied.

Choosing the appropriate strategy When to choose one strategy over another

If you have the necessary time and money and you want to eliminate the underlying causes of conflict, you can opt in favour of problem resolution.

- Whether you're confronted by minor problems or by more pressing issues that require attention, temporary avoidance of the subject may be the strategy to adopt in order to take the pressure off and give the parties time to reflect.
- In situations involving a rapid and decisive intervention and unpopular measures, coercion may be used.
- When the stakes are very high for the other party and you want to create an atmosphere conducive to future negotiations, accommodation may be used to maintain better working relations.
- In cases where you need a rapid solution and a temporary agreement on thorny and complex issues, compromise is a wise choice.

Obviously, regardless of the strategy applied, a third party (Human Resources, an outside resource) may help resolve a conflict by various types of intervention such as negotiation, mediation or meeting with a facilitator.

Keys to authentic communication

- Valuing others as much as you value yourself
- Seeing anger and aggression as often being a symptom of an underlying need for recognition and respect
- Adopting attitudes that focus on empathy, active listening and the needs of both parties
- Establishing the rules of communication in order to foster a harmonious atmosphere
- Keeping sight of the facts (events, dates, witnesses, etc.)
- Identifying and expressing your feelings
- Assuming responsibility for your emotions, thoughts and actions
- Respecting the rhythm in the dialogue
- Formulating the issue adequately
- Maintaining openness despite negative messages
- Demonstrating empathy and availability and remaining present

Conclusion

Conflict may arise in any organization where two or more parties (individuals or groups) hold differing viewpoints. While the presence of conflict is not a problem in and of itself, ignoring the conflict is a problem. The imbalance triggered by conflict leads to eventual changes, if it is managed adequately. A new sense of balance usually occurs following a crisis.

Conflict may be handled differently according to its causes and type. There is always more than one way of dealing with it.

Facilitating communication continues to be an essential interpersonal skill for managers in dealing with conflict in the workplace.

“In any conflict, no solution is possible if one adversary is incapable of considering the possible validity of the other’s point of view.”

Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990)

References

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The following resources can also be helpful in managing conflict in the workplace:

- Browse the FAQ
- Take advantage of Tandem
- Turn to your company’s EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency