

Conflict: Ways To Tackle It

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Conflict is inevitable in business and relationships. Everywhere you turn, there is potential for conflict exists. We conflict with ourselves, conflict with others, conflict at work place, conflict at home etc. The word conflict is derived from Latin word "conflictus" – the act of striking together. It may be defined as

A: competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons)

B: mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs drives wishes, or external or internal demands.

Conflict is part of our life. What matters is one should recognize and deal with it appropriately. You can either let conflict or the potential for conflict drag you down or you can use it to lift you to new levels of performance. Understanding what conflict is and why it exists helps shape your response. Generally it is the result of poor communications, disruptions in routines, unclear goals or expectations, the quest for power, ego massage, differences in value systems, or hidden agendas. It finds its expression in rude, discourteous and sometimes hostile behavior; selfishness; strident and defensive language; lack of respect; and increased stress.

During Leadership Day Celebration in Frederick, Maryland, an audience of 80 was asked "how many of you experience conflict at work?" All 80 participants raised their hands. When asked about, how many of your organizations have defined ways to handle conflict, only one raised his hand, whether it is between two individuals, two departments or two clients.

Most people and organizations find conflict uncomfortable and undesirable and think if they just don't talk about it, it will go away. But our experience tells us that this is not true. We cannot put it aside by avoiding the conflict. It can be uncomfortable, disruptive or scary, if not handled properly.

This is most important that the organization leaders should define how the conflict if arises should handle without hurting one's ego. Secondly, the leaders should examine their beliefs around conflict. Normally, our definition of and reaction to conflict originates from our experiences growing up in our family. While some are comfortable with conflict, others avoid and silence it. How an organization deals with conflict is often a reflection of the leadership's view of and reaction to conflict. Leadership's clarity and defined approach to conflict creates a safe, motivating and productive organization. Thirdly, all employees should be trained on key communication skills including the power of non-verbal and verbal communication; giving and receiving feedback; avoiding triangles; and staying objective and managing reactions.

Kinds of Conflicts:

Emotional Conflict:

This may start with simplest things like finding parking, asking to get some work to be done, requesting neighbor to reduce the volume of music or TV. There is a chance, the conflict will sparkle

with exchange of heated words. Emotional reactions plays major role here.

Disagreements:

There are actually opposing points of view in question. Disagreements may hold deeper threats to person's preferences or beliefs. This may have sufficient power to alienate members, unless compromise or resolution is mutually agreed to. At this level individuals move away from dealing with specifics and tend toward generalizations. Compromise may be one of the most acceptable strategy to avoid it.

Contests:

This is win / win situation. Here the original focus of conflict has been faded into background as it mainly turns on last outcome – who will 'win.' Sometimes, ego problems blocks the way to finding solution.

Fight or Flight:

At this level individuals move away from regarding each other as honorable equals, where both the parties indulge in hurting their opponents in some way. Now it is either to fight or flee the situation. Once again the route cause of conflict is lost here.

Intractable Situations:

Here individuals are no longer engaged in any rational process at all. They are focused entirely on personal satisfaction through damage. It is not a concern where damage might spread and how it affects the organisation. It is difficult to repair the damage caused by this situation. One must move to a lower level of perceived damage and threat before rational resolution becomes a possibility.

In short, emotional conflict or disagreements can be handled by normal techniques. But beyond that it is difficult to come to terms with.

Causes of Conflict:**Non-verbal and verbal communication**

It is often not the words we use but how we say them or what body language we use at that time creates reaction in others leading to unexpected conflict of misunderstanding.

Giving and receiving feedback;

How we give feedback and also react to feedback being given to us impacts effective communications. Managers need to be trained on giving both positive and constructive feedback and employees need to be trained on how to receive and respond to feedback given. Organizations that spend time on these skills develop a culture of learning rather than one of fear, blaming and finger-pointing.

Triangle Communication;

A communication triangle is created when an individual has an issue with someone instead of going directly to that person, goes to third party to discuss about the person in question or issue. It starts with words like “Can you believe he said that?”, “Don't you think it's unfair that she did that?” etc. This kind of communication is dangerous and destructive to organization. The employees must be taught to engage in productive communication which avoids triangles and directly deals with individuals with whom they have issues. .

Wrong Interpretation:

Conflict often arises when an individual interprets or makes an assumption about another's words or actions. We assume a lot by someone's remark or what he/she says. We interpret wrongly, when said “this needs to be done” as an order rather than request. We fail to recognize that another's words or actions are mere situational. We must understand the situation, and ask for clarification before coming to conclusion.

Needs and Wants:

When people's basic needs for recognition, affection, and affiliation are not met in their team or work environment, it makes the person unwell, tired, and hungry and overstressed leading to conflict with fellow colleagues.

Perception:

Every one of us sees things through different lenses that filter information based on our experiences. We filter all information through our own personal lens or perceptions. Having different perceptions is normal.

Knowledge and Information:

It is said knowledge is power. When the information or knowledge given to us is not correct or full the conflict arises. Sometimes a person holds a key piece of information and hoards it. This can be rectified by sharing the knowledge freely.

Expectations:

When expectations of each other are not known or clear, the conflict occurs. We all naturally hold expectations for ourselves and others. Conflicts can occur when we do not clarify expectations or also when we forget to review our expectations periodically.

Growing Up Differently:

Conflicts will also occur because we all grew up differently. This can include the results of growing up in a particular race, ethnic, or religious group or because of our gender. Each generation views life and work differently. When we do not try to learn our differences, we will misunderstand our actions, judge, and create distance between us. Western business people quickly misunderstand Asian business people when they don't learn how the Asians do their business or it is vice versa with Asian people.

Values We Value

Conflict also occurs because of a differences in values. You can avoid any conflicts if you are clear on your values and those held by others. Values are beliefs that one holds strongly that frame your word and behaviors. A belief becomes a value when you are totally comfortable telling anyone about it. Once values are held strongly, they would be willing defend it. Once they are ingrained, they are hard to change. When somebody tries shake up the belief, we tend to defend ourselves, which might lead to conflict again.

Ability to Deal with Conflicts:

An underlying cause that keeps people from resolving conflicts is their willingness and ability to deal with conflicts. One might not have the skills to know how to deal with conflicts. In fact too few of us ever had a class in dealing with conflicts and interpersonal problems. Mostly we keep growing watching elders around, unfortunately who did not have the required interpersonal skills to deal with conflict. Sometimes, ones troubled childhood stops him from getting along with people. So, leaving conflict situation as it is will still worsen the situation. It has to be taken care of immediately and eased off. What to do when it occurs? In general, genuinely caring individuals and who seek to reach an agreement have certain steps they can take. There are few tips which can be applied to clear the heated situation.

Deal with it directly:

Limit the amount of partisan supporters that can be dredged up. They will cause more than one problem, but first and foremost, you must take action by putting a lot of pride at stake. By limiting the conversation directly with the involved will ease off lots of pressure and outcome. Encourage them to take action immediately and come up with solution. Waiting generally strengthens the feelings behind the irritation and becomes difficult to find alternative.

Be like a lightening rod:

You have to act like lightening rod, when lightening strikes, lightening rod takes the electrical current and run it harmlessly to the ground. In the same way, you have to take the jolts and divert them harmlessly away if you have well constructed foundation of core values. Once you know your mission, who you are and where you want to be, it helps you with direction. If you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything.

Watch for Signals:

In handling the conflict situation, one should know ones own strengths and weaknesses, your belief and perception how they shape your answer. Once you get slightest signal of something is cooking up, immediately take action and clear the situation.

Be in control:

Understand that when you are dealing with people, not everyone will live up to your expectations all the time. Don't overreact to the situation nor don't sink to their level. Because when you lie down with dogs you get fleas.

Keep a positive outlook:

If you expect good things to happen, they will for sure. But, if you are expecting bad things, then you better believe it won't happen. Your attitude will govern your response.

Maintain sense of humor:

Laughter is the best medicine not only for health, but also for lightening the situation around. Learn to laugh harder and more frequently. Keep the talk interesting; don't let your boorish behavior provide comical relief to someone.

Set rules:

Under conflict situation set goals as how to resolve it. Think! What happens if not solved, what would a successful situation be like. Look for common ground. Be positive. The possible solution to your interest might be to agree to disagree, but do it amicably.

Understand the root cause:

The best method to treat a disease is to understanding the root cause rather than treating the symptoms. One should try to understand, what makes you to behave in particular manner. The people involved with the situation should agree to one point that, problem can be tackled and solved. Once you arise at this conclusion, it is time to speak out individuals thought. There is an old saying that a problem well defined is already half solved.

Thinking win – win:

Sometimes disagreement will lead to a more effective answer to conflict. A good decision is reached when everyone is given in their little. Being submissive, does not mean that you loose your identity. By changing, you might find yourself as well as find others, understand them clearly. Remove the barrier of power struggle.

Remove Emotions:

Separate your feeling from the problem. When the emotions get mixed up in the conflict, the outcome is in doubt. It clouds your logic and rational thinking that is essential to arrive at a situation.

Take Action:

Once you have arrived at win – win situation, accept the solution. Never give second thought to it, for one of you may change your mind and situation may get worsen.

Well, there are no simple answers when dealing with complex issues, but having a plan and standards which we honorably deal with and value, will always offer an objective base from which we can hope to offer an honest opinion. Very rarely, we have to deal with deeper and more painful issues. By using strategies as above, coupled with our own ideas the conflicts can be settled amicably.

Case 1:

In Woodstocklive organization, Mr. Sparta was the Office Superintendent. He was very simple person, and had soft corner for every employee. He was like big brother to all. Due to his soft side, most employees took undue advantage of that, they were not contributing to their fullest extent to the organization. But still, organization was running smooth, without trouble, without complaint, as a team. There were conflicts and Mr. Sparta solved them immediately without further comment. Many people told him, you are too soft with employees; you have to have strong views sometimes. He always took responsibility on behalf of his subordinates, and faced the top management. Never once, there was problem of team work.

Case 2:

In Simpleways organization, Mr. Omar was the Office Superintendent. A sincere and dedicated to work person. Problem was, he was very head strong, argued with everyone, fought with every one for one reason or other without much reason. Most of the employees, feeling that why should we break head, if the things happened our way, fine if not forget it. No point in arguing and spoiling a day. This caused a sort split in the organization, people started to withdraw, because their views were not respected, never considered, because everything should be according to Mr. Omar's vision. This led to slow growth of the organization, the speed was reduced, no volunteers who were there earlier to take personal interest as if it is their own family work. Everything became practical, business to business,

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