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Handling Conflict in the Work Environment

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Abstract

Workplace conflicts are inevitable. Even so, it is possible for managers and supervisors to recognize and identify conflict in the work environment and to make deliberate choices among several identifiable alternatives as to how to deal with the conflict. In an enlightened workplace, it is even possible to turn conflict into a positive force, rather than a negative, destructive factor. This article first examines some erroneous assumptions inherent in traditional patterns of reacting to workplace conflict. It considers several key elements of successful planning for conflict prevention, and workplace strategies that can help minimize conflicts. Several identifiable approaches to conflict management along with their predictable outcomes are highlighted: the forceful approach, avoidance approach, compromising approach, accommodation approach, and the collaborative approach. Stages of the conflict resolution process are presented, along with proven means and alternatives for resolving progressive levels of conflict in the work environment.

Introduction

Conflict in the work environment is inevitable. How many times do workers find themselves in dispute with co-workers? How frequently does one watch fellow workers battle it out during the work day? When people with different value systems, perspectives, and motivations get together, some conflict is an inevitable result. For administrators concerned with efficiency and productivity in the work place, conflict can mean trouble. How should conflict be analyzed? How do differing notions of fairness contribute to conflict? What are the essential steps in moving toward resolution? What are some alternatives to litigation or grievance review? Before these questions can be addressed, one must understand the underlying assumptions of the most traditional ways

of handling conflicts (conflict resolution or some other method), and how these assumptions can actually lead to escalation in a dispute.

Assumptions in Traditional Conflict Resolution

What could result if co-workers were in conflict and their supervisor insisted that the two of them "get the problems out in the open"? This confrontational approach almost always has been ineffective. Bohan (1990) observed the following underlying assumptions of this approach:

- Conflicts are necessarily negative events;
- The right answer is held by only one of the parties;
- The purpose of resolution is to extract the right answer;
- The rightness of the answer is dependent on the title of the disputants;
- Conflicts are caused by people, not by systems;
- Others' positions or behavior is unreasonable; and
- There must be winners and losers in conflict resolution.

Pulhamus (1991) noted that conflicting assumptions of fairness also may contribute to disputes. Employees often see fairness as an equality issue, assuming that equity requires that all staff members be treated the same. Project directors and coordinators may see fairness as a matter of rightfully recognizing individual accomplishments. Given these differing constructs of fairness, it is easy to see how conflicts can arise.

Before reading on, pause for a moment to reflect on a conflict in which you have been involved. What was the situation? How did you respond? What was the outcome? We will return to these conflict episode reflections later.

All the assumptions mentioned above contribute to a model of conflict resolution that discounts both the inevitability of conflict and its creative potential. To capitalize on this creative potential, Bohan (1990) suggested the following to replace the traditional assumptions:

- Everyone is behaving rationally and desires the common good;

- Conflicts result from inadequate systems, not from bad people;
- Conflicts arise when individuals or groups hold differing values and/or objectives; and
- Conflicts may become vehicles for new systems through which desired outcomes can be realized.

These assumptions move beyond blaming project staff members and emphasize the necessity of creating effective systems for conflict resolution. Note that no set procedure is suggested, just a set of assumptions and attitudes that will promote creative solutions. Putting these improved assumptions to work requires significantly more planning and a recognition of the need for public procedure.

Planning the Work Environment

Firth (1991) argued that the supervisor is responsible for creating an environment in which conflict is rare and easily resolvable. She suggested that a number of key elements are necessary for avoiding the polarization that can lead to conflict:

- **Vision.** The supervisor should provide employees with a plan. There should be little doubt of the direction for the organization. Conflicts can arise when the future appears to be in doubt. Vague goals cloud motivation and judgment.
- **Goals.** The supervisor is responsible for establishing achievable goals designed to accomplish a common vision. Goals direct activity and tend to circumvent discord by focusing energy on common objectives.
- **Communication.** Utilizing vision and goals to forestall conflict requires open communication. Supervisors must be approachable and must deal honestly with complaints. Such an atmosphere presupposes the development of trust and mutual respect. Rees (1991) noted that trust requires that leaders and members treat one another with respect. Trust may be jeopardized if commitments are not honored, if confidences are not respected, or if there is intended or perceived dishonesty in relationships. Building trust

requires effort. Breach of trust (through disregard or through lack of respect for the differences among group members) can be devastating to group effort.

- **Leadership.** Supervisors should see their leadership roles as opportunities to influence the working lives of their employees. It is essential that leadership facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a productive work environment.
- **Education.** Each employee should understand the various roles of those who work in the organization. Conflicts can arise when roles become confused.
- **Morale.** An effective supervisor pays attention to the overall mood of the staff, noticing changes in attitude. Changes may be exhibited through negative work habits and/or through interpersonal interactions. Supervisors who are alert may often intervene in time to avoid conflict before it becomes negatively overt.
- **Feedback.** Employees want to know how well they are doing. Supervisors can help prevent or manage conflict by providing regular, constructive feedback. This can also help prevent uninformed office gossip among productive workers and can assist employees toward further development of their skills as well.

Organizational Improvement Strategies

It is possible to implement management techniques and problem-solving strategies that address dissension within the context in which it occurs. These strategies will help supervisors achieve an open, productive work environment. Since some degree of polarization and negative competition is inevitable, project administrators must become aware of various strategies for preventing needless discord.

Conflict Prevention Strategies

French (1994) offers several strategies for supervisors who wish to implement the key elements of a productive workplace:

- **Recruitment and selection.** Identify people who have

- excellent interpersonal skills for collaborative work.
- **Promotion.** Value well-developed group and intergroup skills. Exercise promotion as a reward.
 - **Training and management development.** Train supervisors in group and intergroup skills.
 - **Performance appraisal and review.** Institute group and intergroup skills as a performance criterion which will be reviewed.
 - **Compensation and other rewards.** Observe and praise intergroup and group behaviors with monetary rewards. Cooperation should be rewarded, while lack of cooperation should not be rewarded with pay increases (pp. 120-121).

When these strategies are implemented effectively, disagreements are minimized. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, some lack of accord inevitably arises in any work situation. The wise project administrator discerns the ways in which workers and their supervisors typically handle disagreements. Following are some common approaches. Which ones sound most familiar in your work place?

Approaches to Conflict Management

Whetton and Cameron (1995) list five conflict management approaches and expected outcomes. These approaches assess people's responses to interpersonal confrontations. With the **forceful approach**, the objective is to get one's way because the issue is important to the individual, even if some feelings are hurt in the process. The predictable outcome is vindication on the part of the forceful individual but a feeling of defeat and anger on the other side.

The **avoidance approach** focuses on avoiding any conflict, using the rationale that disagreements cause tension. The likely outcome is that problems become internalized without resolution, contributing to frustrations which surface in other areas.

The **compromising approach** seeks to reach agreement quickly, believing the longer the conflict continues the longer both parties will be distracted from work. This approach also reflects fear that frustration will result from a protracted settlement time.

The anticipated outcome is that both parties may look for a "quick fix" which leaves the underlying issues unresolved and neither side satisfied.

A person who relies on the **accommodation approach** attempts to avoid upsetting the other party because of a desire to keep positive feelings and a harmonious atmosphere at all times. The likely outcome is that one party may take advantage of the other. Such an approach may lead to lack of mutual trust and respect, laying the groundwork for future conflicts.

The **collaborative approach** encourages both parties to work together to solve the problem with each viewpoint being considered equally important. This influences the outcome and the equity of the process. A probable outcome is that the problem will be resolved with each party feeling the decision was a fair one. This will result in an increase in trust and a maintenance of mutual respect with the expected further outcome that more positive relationships will have been forged through the resolution process.

Thus, the **collaborative approach** offers the greatest possibility for successful de-escalation and eventual resolution of conflicts in the workplace. This approach also offers the only reliable possibility for improving the work environment.

Return now to the conflict episode you reflected on earlier. Which of the above-stated approaches best reflects your response in that situation? How did the other party respond? Was the outcome beneficial to both sides? If not, what changes would have improved the chances for a successful outcome?

Conflict Reduction Strategies

Steinmetz and Todd (1992) offer conflict reduction strategies which are consistent with the collaborative approach. While a win-win scenario is the ideal outcome, the immediate objective is to lessen negative emotional overlays and to focus on the issues. Strategies outlined by Steinmetz and Todd are

- **Avoid anger, impatience, and fighting.** Supervisors must keep their own emotions under control when confronted by an competitive, angry employee. This self-control will demonstrate maturity and ability to cope with stressful

situations in a calm manner. A manager must consider what is good for the organization, rather than for just a specific individual or department. Supervisors must make every effort to be unbiased.

- **Be sensitive to emotional attitudes of others.** It is difficult to resolve conflict under emotional circumstances. Therefore, negative emotions must be dealt with first. A supervisor must listen empathetically and must gain understanding of each employee's concerns before offering recommendations.
- **Be specific—focus on issues, not on people.** In order to resolve problems effectively, the issues must be depersonalized. Blaming others who may or may not be responsible for the dissension frustrates the process. Identify specific events for an objective, focused discussion.
- **Avoid we/they distinctions.** Supervisors must not use the word "you" in an accusing manner, such as, "You don't know what they're doing." One must avoid "you" talk altogether because it leads to greater polarization. "We/they" statements also tend to accuse one party while possibly clearing the other. Such language would encourage one or both parties to perceive the supervisor as biased.
- **Gather information beforehand.** Get the information straight. Seek out all sources of information but only from those directly involved. This knowledge will be needed to clarify issues and to develop viable alternatives for resolving the dispute.
- **Limit expectations.** Expectations must be tailored to the reality of the situation. In some cases, a simple lack of information may have led to the problem, and such grievances may be resolved quickly. More often, however, time is necessary to smooth conflict situations. Emotions must settle, and trust must be re-established for dissension to be fully resolved (pp. 371-372).

The Conflict Resolution Process

Denton (1989) argued that the essential element of any conflict resolution procedure is guiding communication. Keeping

in mind Bohan's (1990) traditional assumptions, one may consider Denton's four-stage process for directing communication:

Stage One: De-emphasize the win/lose attitude. Zero-sum games of dividing the pie only increase polarization and hinder creative resolution.

Stage Two: Create a positive atmosphere. Do this by emphasizing common goals, cooperation, and the urgency of resolving the conflict.

Stage Three: Simplify the information. Denton noted that conflicts often are generated out of hostility and suspicion. Cut away emotional issues and focus on the essence of the matter. Supervisors must not indulge in personal attacks or histrionics.

Stage Four: Resolve the conflict. Four objectives are embodied in this: (a) Get the message across in a non-threatening manner; (b) make sure the message has been received accurately; (c) accurately understand the other person's message; and (d) use a rational, problem-solving approach to resolution (pp. 29-33).

Any effective process for resolving conflict must incorporate these stages. Other important considerations are

- Does the process clarify the opposing interests?
- Does the process assist in building functional relationships?
- Does the process generate workable options?
- Do all parties perceive the process as legitimate (fair)?
- Does the process recognize alternative means of dispute resolution?
- Does the process, over time, lead to improved communication?
- Does the process promote the establishment of prudent commitments? (Ertel, 1991, p. 29).

Consensus Building

The four stages Denton (1989) discussed lead toward a consensus as both parties consider the other's perspective and

seek mutually satisfying solutions. This process is highly dependent on the maturity of the employees and on their willingness to make some concessions to the other party. Often it is important for both parties to adjust expectations and to be flexible as they seek resolution. If adjusting expectations feels like compromising on important issues, the need to adjust expectations may cause some disputants to feel they are being asked to compromise on important issues. If that happens, the effort to reach consensus may collapse. What happens when disputants cannot (or will not) reach consensus? Mediation and arbitration may be the answer.

Alternative Means of Conflict Resolution

Elangovan (1995) stated that outside third-party alternatives may be the preferred choice in some instances. Factors to be considered in addition to personal characteristics of the employees are nature of the dispute itself, time constraints, and the expertise of the supervisor. Mediation or arbitration may be chosen early on if the situation clearly indicates a need for outside intervention. In other cases, these alternatives may be resorted to when other efforts have failed.

Mediation. This process is similar to consensus-building. The mediator is a person who clarifies issues, facilitates discussion, intervenes to prevent destructive behavior, and offers compromise possibilities (Denton, 1989). Mediators must be trusted, respected, knowledgeable, and neutral (Chaykin, 1994). The mediator asks helpful questions, focuses discussion on the merits of opposing positions, and moves the disputing parties toward a mutually beneficial resolution (Cousins, 1995; Hendler, 1995). Mediation requires that the conflicting parties be willing to reach compromise with the assistance of a neutral third party. When the process is conducted well, mediation often results in an outcome that is acceptable to all parties. However, in some cases the results are not positive. What happens if one or both parties are not satisfied with the outcome?

Arbitration. Arbitration is a step just below litigation. Though risky for both parties, arbitration is less expensive and

time-consuming than litigation. During arbitration, a neutral third party hears from both sides. Opening statements, evidence, objections, witnesses and arguments are all presented to the arbitrator. Once both sides have presented their cases, the arbitrator adjourns to make a decision. This decision is binding and irreversible (Deen, 1995). Arbitration differs from litigation in that it recognizes less stringent rules of evidence and procedure. It is similar to litigation in that the focus of the proceedings is on persuading a third party. Third-party arbitration may be chosen because of one or more of the following reasons:

- The central issue may be of such long-term significance that the supervisor prefers a third-party approach.
- Time constraints may dictate outside assistance rather than going through the consensus-building process.
- A supervisor may want to be exempt from the process due to particular characteristics of the dispute or because he/she recognizes a need for greater expertise in handling the dispute.

For whatever reason(s) mediation or arbitration may be chosen, these alternatives are far superior to the negative effects of lingering unresolved conflict or the expense of an untimely and perhaps unsatisfying outcome of litigation.

Conclusion

Although conflicts in the workplace are inevitable, they are not inevitably destructive (Banner, 1995). The keys to turning conflict into a creative moment are good management of information and appropriate communication. A project administrator intent on turning a dispute into an opportunity for improvement will take all available, relevant information into account; carefully listen to the to all sides; insure that all parties understand; weigh alternatives to the polarized solutions; suggest constructive means of resolving problem areas; and insure that the dispute is resolved in a manner conducive to the long-term health of the organization (Jacobs, 1995).

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