

Handling Conflict Situations

Introduction

In any context where people are working together, and especially in a competitive business environment, disagreements, differences of opinion and conflicting perspectives on different issues are likely to arise. It is worth bearing in mind that not all conflict is negative - creative solutions and new ideas can often emerge from the cut and thrust of debate.

Frequently conflict can become destructive. Negative emotions may be stirred up poisoning the atmosphere, undermining morale, creating stress and destroying workplace relationships. This can lead to a lack of motivation which may ultimately have a diverse effect on performance. If not resolved, conflict can be costly in terms of time and money. The situation may deteriorate, leading to litigation and therefore, damaging an organisations reputation.

If ignored, conflict can escalate or spread to affect others. So, it's vital to manage conflict constructively. Effective conflict management can improve morale and contribute to the development of better teamwork and more productive working relationships.

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

B: Providing direction, units 5,6,7,9 C: Facilitating change, unit 6
D: Working with people, units 1, 2, 5, 6 F: Achieving results, unit 1

Definition

Conflict arises from the clash of competing ideas and personal interests. There are many sources of conflict in the workplace - differences of opinion, dissatisfaction with working conditions or remuneration, excessive workloads, lack of recognition or promotion, perceptions of discriminatory or unfair treatment, feelings of insecurity and fear of redundancy, clashes of personality, misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication and differing expectations of what constitutes appropriate behaviour - to name but a few.

Conflict may occur between managers and their staff, between team members or between departments, sections and managers. Conflict may be expressed openly through disagreements and lack of cooperation, but it may also be hidden, taking the form of irritation, resentment, loss of morale and lack of commitment. Hidden conflict is easier to miss or ignore but can nonetheless be damaging. If nothing is done to address the underlying issues, conflict, whether open or hidden may escalate - from gossip, backbiting and criticism to shouting matches, threats and possible violence. Such consequences can often be prevented by taking early action to address and if possible resolve the issues. This checklist focuses on steps for handling interpersonal conflict.

Action checklist

1. Be aware of conflict

Keep your eyes and ears open for changes in workplace climate and any early signs of developing conflict. Don't turn a blind eye to symptoms of hidden conflict. Conflict can only be safely ignored, if it is momentary and unlikely to escalate. Ignoring conflict may be an easy option initially, but in most cases it does not help, creating a more difficult situation to resolve later.

2. Prepare yourself to take action

Stay calm and ensure that you are able to take a considered, rational and impartial approach to the situation. If you are personally involved, you may need to ask someone else to handle the issue.

- Avoid the temptation to adopt the instinctive reactions of 'fight or flight'. Neither of these approaches is constructive: 'flight' avoids the issue and doesn't resolve the conflict; 'fight' provokes greater conflict and may intimidate the parties involved.
- Avoid passive behaviour - do not take an apologetic stance and accept all points of view whether they are right or wrong.
- Avoid aggressive behaviour – do not take an authoritarian approach and fail to listen to reasoned argument.
- Aim to take an assertive stance by treating all parties with respect and listening to all points of view.
- Take care with your use of language and your body language while dealing with people involved in conflict situations.

3. Investigate the situation

Take time to find out what has happened, who is involved, how people are feeling, and what the issues are. Don't pre-judge the issue or jump to conclusions. Speak individually and confidentially to those involved and listen actively to make sure you understand their point of view. This can be checked by summarising what they have said and reflecting it back to them. Try to identify any underlying causes of conflict which may not be immediately obvious. For example, a member of staff might be in apparent conflict with colleagues, while the root cause could be their perception that a supervisor is treating them unfairly. Be aware that those involved may have differing perceptions of the same situation.

4. Decide on your approach

Having examined the situation decide what action would be appropriate:

- Is this a serious matter or relatively trivial?
- Should organisational discipline or grievance procedures be invoked?
- Is the matter within your sphere of authority or should it be referred to a superior?
- Are any legal issues involved?
- Would the participation of a trade union representative be appropriate?
- Would it be best to make a ruling on the issue yourself, or would an informal gathering to discuss the problem be helpful?
- Is time needed for heated emotions to subside before attempting to move forward?

In most cases a mutually agreed solution will be more effective than an imposed solution which may leave all parties dissatisfied. Consider how you can get those involved to agree to a meeting where they can exchange views and explore the issues.

5. Let everyone have their say

If you are able to get the parties together, you may be able to reach a satisfactory solution. Take a positive, friendly and assertive approach to the meeting and set ground rules for the session. Assertive behaviour will encourage the parties to express their thoughts honestly and openly, understand the causes of conflict and find solutions. Make sure that everyone has the chance to explain their point of view and concerns. People will be more willing to relinquish entrenched positions and consider compromises if they feel that their point of view has been understood and their concerns taken on board.

6. Identify options and agree on a way forward

This is the most important and often the most difficult part of the process. The following steps may be helpful in reaching agreement:

- create an atmosphere where all parties are able to speak openly and honestly and where they can make concessions without losing face
- acknowledge emotional issues but don't allow them to take over
- consider carefully the extent to which you need to control the meeting and intervene in the discussion
- explore the reasons for the disagreement
- identify any misconceptions or misunderstandings which are blocking progress
- encourage the parties to examine their own positions and identify any common ground with others
- look for points which may be negotiable and seek win/win solutions which take the interests of all parties into account
- ask the parties to put forward preferred solutions
- allow time for reflection
- assess each option and help the parties to agree on which represents the best way forward
- secure the commitment of all parties to any agreement.

If no progress is made, a period of reflection may help, but ultimately it may be necessary to bring in another manager or negotiator or to consider external

assistance from a specialist in mediation, ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) or arbitration.

7. Implement what has been agreed

It is important to ensure that everyone is clear about what has been decided and takes personal responsibility for any actions which have been agreed. In some cases a written agreement may be appropriate.

8. Evaluate how things are going

Don't assume that the issue has been finally resolved. Continue to keep an eye on the situation and evaluate how well the solution is working. If the problem reappears it may be necessary to take further action.

9. Consider preventative strategies for the future

Think about the lessons that can be learned from the conflict and the way it was handled. What could be done better next time? How could you develop your conflict management skills? You may wish to consider training in influencing, mediation or dispute resolution techniques for yourself or a colleague.

Looking at the broader context, consider what action can be taken to improve working relationships and encourage a culture of open communication and consultation. Consider whether an organisational procedure for dispute resolution or mediation is needed.

Additional resources

Books

Resolving conflict at work: eight strategies for everyone on the job, rev ed
Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith
San Francisco Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2005

Anger management in a week, Sandi Mann
London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004

Dealing with difficult people at work, 2nd ed,
Brian Salter and Naomi Langford-Wood,
London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003

Mediation for managers: resolving conflict and rebuilding relationships at work, John Crawley and Katherine Graham
London: Nicholas Brealey, 2002

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from the Management Information Centre. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/mic

Internet resources

DTI Employment Relations: Section on resolving disputes: www.dti.gov.uk/er/

ACAS: Section on dispute resolution in the A to Z of work: www.acas.org.uk

Organisations

ACAS, Brandon House, 180 Borough High Street, London SE1 1LW
Tel: 020 7210 3613 www.acas.org.uk

Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution, 70 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1EU
Tel: 020 7356 6000 www.cedr.co.uk

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