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MODULE NAME: PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION MAKING
(BMSK4004)

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TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

CHOSEN PROBLEM

DEFINITION OF CONFLICT

REASONS FOR CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF CONFLICT

MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

MY EXPERIENCE OF CONFLICT AT WORK

SEVEN STEPS TO PROBLEM SOLVING

DECISION MAKING: TYPES, FACTORS AFFECTING DECISION
MAKING AND INGREDIENTS OF GOOD DECISION MAKING

FISHBONE ANALYSIS

MY PROPOSED SOLUTION 1 AND 2

EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

IMPLEMENTING AND REVIEWING THE BEST SOLUTION

CONCLUSION

REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

This report is about identifying a work-based problem, applying problem solving tools and techniques to arrive at a proposed solution through decision making.

The workplace is confronted with different types of problems everyday and as some of the decisions made are inconsequential, a lot of them carry substantial consequences (Maund, A. et al. 2017). Managers must therefore be properly equipped to resolve conflicts by applying tested and proven strategies.

This report will look at 'Conflict in the workplace' as the chosen problem experienced at work, exploring the definition, advantages and disadvantages, and how to overcome conflict at work. This is then followed by an explanation of my experience of conflict at work. Included is the seven steps to problem solving.

Futhermore, as decision making is paramount to problem solving, this will be explored by the types, factors affecting and ingredients of decision making. The fishbone analysis is an important aspect of this report as it shows the causes and effects of a problem when used.

Next are the two proposed solutions where both are evaluated, the best one chosen and implemented. By the end of this report, there should be an understanding to resolving conflict in the workplace successfully.

CHOSEN PROBLEM

In this assignment, I have chosen 'Conflict in the Workplace' as my work-based problem. In my past work experiences, I have witnessed different types of conflicts at work and have also been involved in providing solutions to problems at work. I will be focusing on a case of lack of good management, lack of staff and lack of training for new staff, simply because these three are linked in my case.

The lack of good management was as a result of loss of interest in the business by the manager, some favouritism from the manager to some staff which led to staff taking time off due to stress and lack of support. This also caused overload of work to remaining staff resulting in low morale and invariably causing low productivity.

Also, when new staff were eventually hired, they were thrown into the job with little or no training and expected to perform and 'get on with it'. This led to staff resignation after a short period of time and as a result, quick employee turnover which was not good for business and had significant negative impact on the store finances and reputation.

WHAT IS CONFLICT

Definition: According to the Collins English Dictionary (2019) , conflict is defined as "a serious disagreement and argument about something important where an agreement has not been reached" whilst the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions and principles". Conflict in the workplace arises from differences of individuals working together in teams, as people's values, skills, abilities, beliefs, ego, jobs and lives are brought to the table. These are exhibited when individuals react angrily, become rude and disrespectful, target those they dislike, bully those they feel are a threat to their position and some also become nasty for their own pleasure.

REASONS FOR CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

Conflict can occur from various sources and factors within a team and these could fall into three different categories which are Communication factors, Structural factors and Personal factors (Varney, 1989). Communication factors include poor listening skills; insufficient sharing of information, differences in interpretation and perception and also non-verbal indication ignored or missed. Structural factors are evident in the size of the team, levels of participation amongst team members and levels of interdependence among employees. Personal factors on the other hand are individual's self esteem, personal goals, their needs and values. As Burton (2017) also pointed out, there are some common reasons for conflict in the workplace. Inadequate management is one of those reasons in that, if a leader or manager is weak, there will be dissatisfaction, disorganisation and lack of motivation by the team. Another common reason for conflict could be found in a lack of understanding of the diversity of the group in culture, nationality and personality to name a few. This is why there should be an understanding of equality and diversity laws by management in the workplace.

Furthermore, animosity could be created amongst colleagues if there is lack of support for their wellbeing. There has to be effective resources available for staff.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

People tend to associate conflict with negative results however, conflict could become the driving force for change for the better in the workplace. As much as there are obvious disadvantages, there are also some advantages derived from conflict happening in the workplace. Conflict can be productive if it is resolved and appropriate resolution is found which is an opportunity for growth. Some benefits can even be arrived at

unexpectedly because of increased understanding amongst workmates, as a result of the process of resolution (Prause and Mujtaba, 2015, p. 17). They further pointed out that discussion amongst teammates could expand their awareness about achieving goals without undermining others. Similarly, conflicts can sometimes be productive because colleagues could bring up different ideas no matter how they differ from each other, resulting in an opportunity for learning and growth. If handled properly, the outcome can be a healthy working atmosphere.

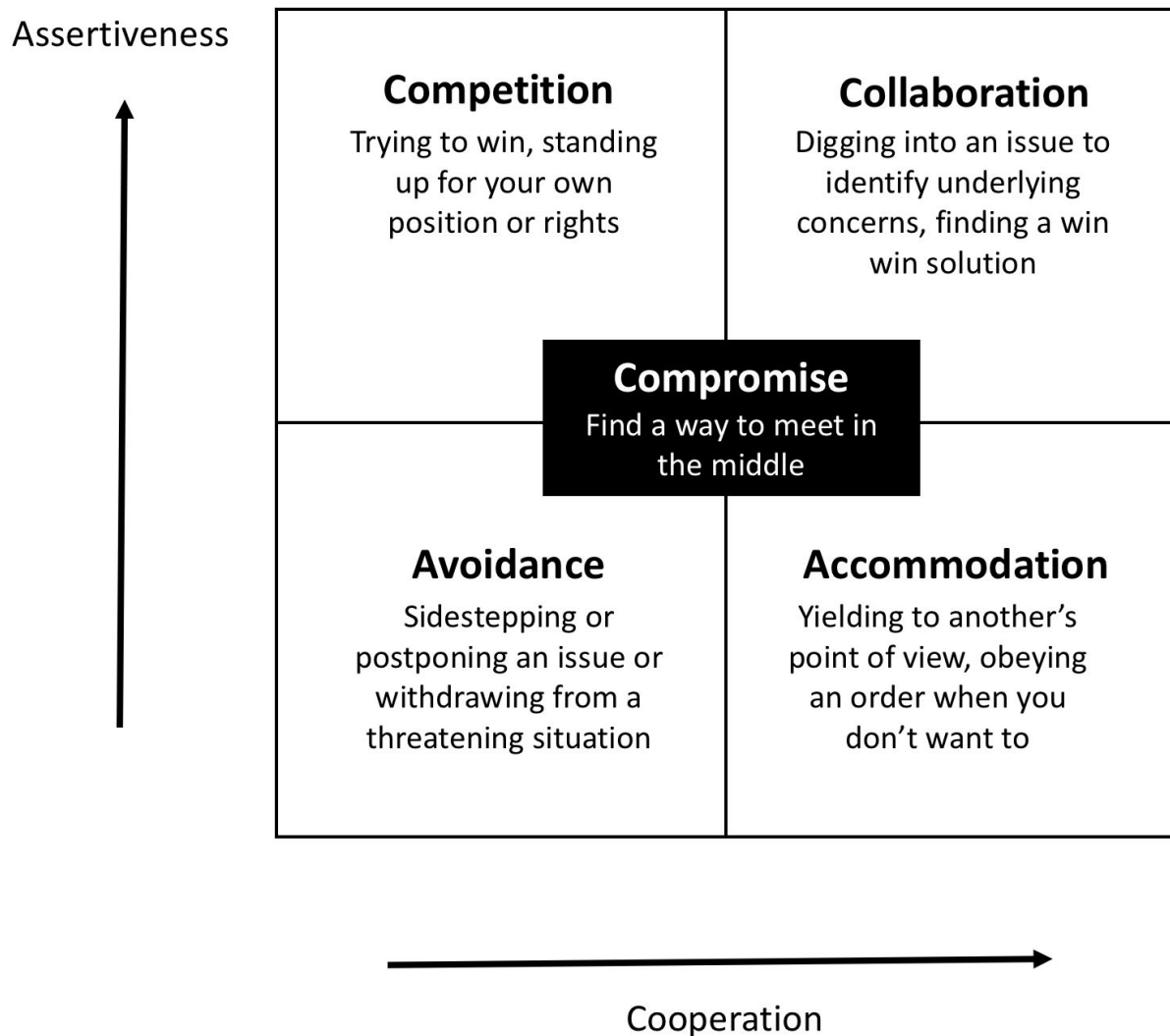
On the other hand, conflict could become escalated in an attempt for resolution if the chosen conflict resolution technique fails. Joseph, C. (2019) pointed out that if the personalities of those involved clashes with the techniques, it creates an unharmonious atmosphere which “could do more harm than good”.

MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

“A good manager does not try to eliminate conflict, they try to keep it from wasting the energies of their people. If you are the boss and your people fight you openly when they think that you are wrong - that is healthy”. (Quote by Robert Townsend, 1920-98). Dignen, B. and McMaster, I. (2013). As much as conflict causes problems like disagreements, threaten relationships and positions, display of anger, targeting people disliked, reduction or erasure of motivation, lack of creativity and loss of productivity, it could also be healthy in the workplace. Healthy in the sense that those disagreements could divulge some fundamental organisational problems needed to be acted upon and resolved.

As earlier pointed out that conflict falls into three categories which are communication, structural and personal, it can be managed using the Thomas-Kilmann's 5 styles for conflict handling. These are Competition, Collaboration, Avoidance, Accommodation and Compromise, as shown in the diagram below. (Fig. 1.1)

Thomas-kilmann's 5 Conflict Resolution Model (Fig. 1.1)



As shown in this model and as a result of Thomas-Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) assessment, people's behaviour in conflict situations can be categorised into Assertiveness where it is about satisfaction of their own issues, and Cooperativeness where it is all about other people's issues and somewhere inbetween the two. (Sample, J. 2008).

Competing: This is known as the "win-lose" method of managing conflict. It is a bold and authoritative way of dealing with issues that need a quick resolution. It either works or it does not work.

Collaboration: This is also known as the “win-win” method where cooperation from parties at either end of the conflict work together with trust to reach a resolution. A lot of time and effort is normally invested into this method.

Avoidance: Managers will approach this method if the person involved becomes emotional and they need to find a solution on a personal level. This method is also sometimes used when the issues are projected to become expensive for the company. More often than not, it is not a feasible long-term approach.

Accommodation: This could work if the conflict is between different departments or organisation. It involves cooperation and sacrifices to safeguard the future relationship or benefit. It is pertinent to note that this method could counteract the company’s goals.

Compromising: This is seen as the “lose-lose” method. Although the notion is to find a way to meet in the middle somewhere it however could lead to a sense of none-achieving any resolution and could take a long time too. In order to make this method work, a lot of time and cooperation is needed.

MY EXPERIENCE OF CONFLICT AT WORK

My experience of conflict at work is based around lack of good and effective management which resulted in lack of training for staff, low morale in staff and ultimately shortage of staff. Good leadership is an essential ingredient to minimise conflict at work and be able to manage it effectively when it happens, as conflict can sometimes be a factor in encouraging colleagues to express their ideas and skills to effective problem solving. Similarly, “a leader should be able to possess problem-solving skills to enable identification of issues, communication and conflict resolution skills to be able to implement the interpersonal issues that occur” (Morgan, P. 2017).

I worked for one of the leading Optical companies in the UK for a couple of years and really developed a passion for my job. I was an Optical Consultant and my job mostly entailed delivering the best customer service experience to our patients in 'pre-screening' before they are seen by the Optometrist. Also making sure they are 'dispensed' with the right products in glasses or contact lenses. The job requires intensive training before being 'thrown in the deep end' and also continuous training on the job.

The problem witnessed by me was a progression of a couple of mismanagement of staff by the branch manager due to her diminished interest in the business. She even sometimes vocalises the fact that she is nearing her retirement age so everyone should cease stressing her out with 'petty' squables. It was significantly obvious to most of us that she was just hanging on so that she could retire with all the benefits of her many years in the company and was not interested in finding solutions and resolving conflicts created by her lack of interest.

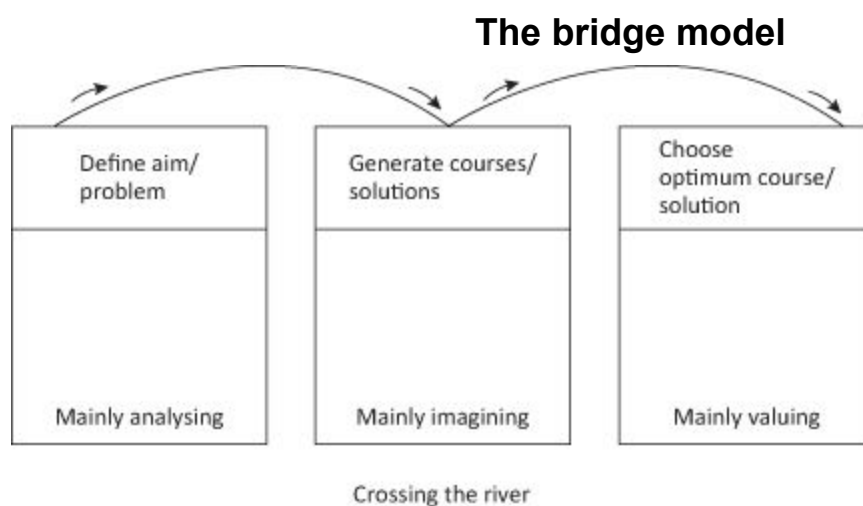
I could site many instances of staff feeling lost and disillusioned in their job and one case that comes to mind is that of the new Contact-lens Optician feeling not supported by the manager for effective and productive running of his clinic. According to him, all the support promised him before taking the job were not being met and he felt he was not listened to as well. He was very enthusiastic about raising the contact-lens business to a higher level, maintaining that level and continuously raising the bar.

However, due to his record cards not found and prepared before clinic starts and not having available staff to 'hand-over' patients, he struggled with the aftercare part of the clinic and wasted a lot of time looking for his patient's record card thereby making his clinic run late, or sometimes patient's ordered (or not ordered) products not processed on time. He also had to most times accomodate 'teaches' (where new contact-lens wearers are taught insertion, removal and aftercare), because of lack of availability of trained staff. I was one of the trained contact-lens staff who mostly was not available to support the contact-lens optician because I was busy attending to other customer's needs due to shortage of staff. It was also for these reasons that record cards were not diligently found and prepared

before clinics. We did not have enough staff to do all the jobs required to run a successful practice. Staff generally felt let down and unmotivated in their job so ultimately, they left to work with competitors in the business. Furthermore, we all felt that the manager was not investing in training new staff effectively before they continue to develop their skills on the job which led to many costly and unnecessary mistakes being made, invariably leading to staff leaving after a short period of their employment.

SEVEN STEPS TO PROBLEM SOLVING

Adair, J. (2007) mentioned that “a problem is a solution in disguise”. This suggests that to be able to have the satisfaction of arriving at a solution, there must have been a problem. Therefore, the seven steps to problem solving and decision making is a process mostly used in the workplace which helps to arrive at a solution. Adair also suggested that it is not enough to only think of solutions in the head, but to get a team across a river, a simple bridge has to be constructed (speaking figuratively) to enable all members of the team the know-how of problem solving. This can be clearly seen in the illustration below;



(Fig. 2.1)

(Image by safaribooksonline.com)

The illustration from the 'bridge model' might not indicate seven steps, however there are seven strategies to follow and each one integrates into the next one as listed by (Friscia, J. 2016).

1. Find the right problem to solve.
2. Define / aim of the problem.
3. Analysis of the problem.
4. Developing the possibilities of solving the problem.
5. Choosing the best solutions.
6. Implementing the solutions.
7. Evaluation.

Finding the right problem to solve means being farsighted, sensing or anticipating the problem even before it overcomes the team. It is appropriate to point out here that most times, there is not that luxury of finding the problem before it happens so, the problem needs to be defined. By defining the problem, it should include what the problem is, when the problem occurred, where the problem happened and how it happened (Gano, D. L. 2011).

Next step after defining the problem is to analyse. By analysing it means identifying the potential causes of the problem and why the problem happened in the first place as this proves the cause of the problem. It is very important to collect all facts related to the problem for analysis and brainstorming which leads to the next stage of developing the prospects of solving the problem.

Choosing the best solution is the next step and this can be facilitated by brainstorming ideas and resolutions. Friscia, J. (2016) stated that "there are three criteria to meet when choosing the best solution and these are: operation validity, meaning the idea can be implemented; economic validity, meaning there is a firm financial benefit to the idea; and personal commitment, which means the idea is believed".

The final stages are to implement the chosen solution meaning the problem is fixed and evaluate after a period of time to measure how effective the solution chosen has been.

DECISION MAKING

Decision making can be defined as the act of making a choice between two or more options. Adair, J. (2008) believes decision-making together with leadership skills and communication skills falls into the top three qualities of a successful manager. He also states that “decision-making focuses on reaching a goal or objective, and it is about the how, why, when, and where a course of action and how to overcome obstacles and to find solutions to problems. It is what turns thought into action, implying change and also requires a decision to be made against a framework of uncertainty and risk”. These risks sometimes results into considerable or significant ramifications.

People’s lives could be shaped by some principal decisions made but great decisions can be reached if creativity and critical analysis is employed where new and varied options tried, and also where evidences are objectively measured to arrive at a new or creative solution (Maund, A. Schriek, M. and Tinkler, P. K. 2017).

Types of decisions making

In the workplace, management’s decision making can be grouped under three types which are: Routine decisions, Adaptive decisions and Innovative decisions.

Routine decisions: These are decisions made when there is a blue-print for procedures, rules and organisational policies already set out to manage conflict.

Adaptive decisions: These decisions are made when organisations are faced with uncommon problems that where there is limited understanding of the issue.

Innovative decisions: These are similar to adaptive decisions in the sense that the workplace may be faced with an uncommon issue however, creative resolutions are imperative.

Factors affecting decision making

Several factors affect and influence decision making in the workplace. Some of them make greater impact than others but still important in decision making process in order to arrive at an effective or regrettable decision. The factors are as follows;

Past experiences and knowledge: These can affect future decision making because people would normally pull on their knowledge to make decisions based on experience they had. Dietrich, C (2010) believes that people are most likely to make a decision on a similar issue based on past experiences. It is as simple as not wasting time deliberating on other ways when a decision has worked in a similar situation.

The ability of the manager: A manager must be capable and have the skills to be an effective decision maker. They must be able to think situations through and recognise that quick decisions are not always the best ones so, care must be taken when analysing, synthesising and valuing the elements of their decisions (Adair, J. 2008).

Creative thinking: Thinking creatively in decision making produces new ideas and thinking outside the box. The manager's imagination comes into effect where the unexpected is exploited and elements of surprise might happen.

Stress: If the manager or the decision maker is stressed out, this will definitely affect the decisions, likewise those involved in the issue.

The other factors that would affect decision making in the workplace are Organisation's attitude, Self concept, Critical nature of work, Interpersonal conflict, Routine versus non-routine, Time availability, Risk associated with decision, Money, Energy and Degree of acceptance of decision and support.

Ingredients of good decision...what makes a good decision

There are similarities between the components of a good decision and effective problem solving process. Involvement of the team in the decision

making process is crucial where tasks are delegated especially when there is a blueprint or set process to follow. This is mostly useful in routine decisions. Delegation to subordinates brings about trust, loyalty and high self-esteem.

Brainstorming is very useful in decision making process because it helps to avoid 'functional fixedness' where the mind is freed to take other suggestions and possibilities into consideration (Adair, J. 2007). Ideas are generated especially in a group or team setting.

Similarly, Creativity serves a great purpose in effective decision making. Adair pointed out that, being creative means being imaginative or innovative and different and that creative people are able to recognise the similarities between thoughts, things and form of expression and are able to put all these together to arrive at a good decision.

Objectivity is another ingredient of a good decision. A manager should not be emotionally attached to any decision made even if they feel that decision may not be the best, as long as it is a rational decision.

Furthermore, it is important to educate other members of the team in making appropriate decisions. This might be where training is organised through support from top management in the organisation.

It is also important to scrutinise the decision process already formed if it is not working. Information must be interpreted in more ways than one by the involvement of other members of the team. If necessary, the manager should change their way of deciding on issues by re-evaluating the process, time and learn from experience.

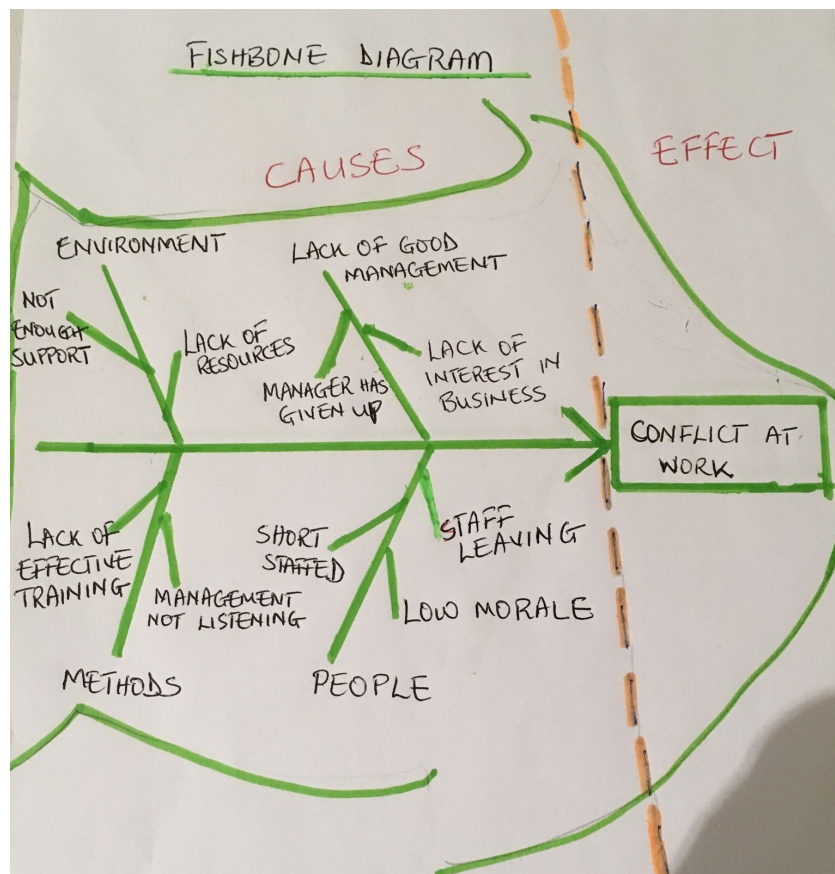
Lastly, managers should only deal with decisions requiring a certain level of expertise, supporting the implementation of decisions and give credit to those who have had to make certain decisions.

FISHBONE ANALYSIS

Fishbone analysis was introduced to the workplace world by Karou Ishikawa in 1968. That is why it is referred to as the Ishikawa diagram/analysis today. He was the quality control statistician at Kawasaki where he used the diagram for cause and effect in the hope of understanding the root cause of their problems.

The name 'Fishbone' was chosen because of how it is a replica of a skeleton of a fish. It a very useful tool for categorising and understanding causes and effect of issues at the workplace. On the Fishbone, the standard categories are; the 6 M's which are Method, Machine, Materials, Manpower, Measurement and Management. The 4 P's are: Place, Procedure, People and Policies and the 4 S's are Surroundings, Suppliers, Systems and Skills. I will be customising my fishbone diagram to suit my chosen problem in this report as shown in the diagram below.

(Fig 3.1)



MY PROPOSED SOLUTION 1

I will propose for the 'Area Manager' to have a meeting with the branch manager to find out the causes of the problems at the practice. The fishbone analysis would help determine these causes so that the right resolution could be found concerning all staff involved or affected. It is also important for the Area Manager to call a meeting with the Contact Lens Optician in attendance as well, so that all grievances can be tabled and appropriate solution found. Solution in-form of collaboration between the branch manager and the contact lens optician is needed. The manager would need to listen to the optician so that a 'win-win' solution can be found. "Collaborating between two people might take the form of exploring their disagreement to learn from each other's insight, digging into the issues to understand the underlying concerns for resolution (Sample, J. 2008).

MY PROPOSED SOLUTION 2

A creative process would be my second proposed solution and this involves the use of 'Bransford's IDEAL model' (1984).

(Fig 4.1) (image from slideshare.net)

IDEAL stands for

- I identify problems and opportunities
- D define alternative goals
- E explore possible strategies
- A anticipate and act
- L look and learn

By going through the above process of recognising there is a problem with the Contact Lens Optician and other staff members is a good start. The goals need to be defined so that everyone involved is clear about resolution. As this is a creative strategy, the manager will have to be open to suggestions and different strategies through brainstorming with colleagues. Act on the plan which everyone or majority have agreed upon as this would enable enthusiastic working relationships where team members help each other to grow and master skills.

After the implementation of these solutions, evaluation should take place by examining the consequences of the actions taken, whether it has worked or not. If it has not, then the strategy will need to be re-visited.

EVALUATION

Solution 1 has been about applying the fishbone analysis to determine all the root causes and effect of the problem of conflict between the branch manager and the staff. In this strategy, 'top' management in-form of the Area Manager and the Branch manager are the ones managing the conflict.

In this case, the managers are the decision makers and they will be seen to be taking responsibility of being an effective leader, especially as the fishbone analysis has enabled them to identify the root causes to work on for a good resolution. This is also a way of collaboration in the management team so that the branch manager feels their is support from the organisation.

Solution 2 on the other hand, though has some similarities to the fishbone strategy, involves more creativity in its approach. Adair, J (2007) believes that being creative produces new ideas because people's imagination is put into use. The IDEAL strategy used here with the involvement of all staff concerned opens up brainstorming which generates comradeship amongst Branch manager and staff. The parties involved also has the

tendency of feeling valued when their suggestions about strategies are considered or put into action.

IMPLEMENTING AND REVIEWING THE BEST SOLUTION

My chosen solution between the two discussed previously would be 'solution 2'. This proposed solution has been chosen because it involves the engagement of all parties involved and calls for cooperation and collaboration. It is a creative approach that allows unconscious assumptions to be broken down through brainstorming and teamwork. Adair, J (2007) reinforced this in his statement that when self-imposed limitations are broken down, solutions to problems are easily reached".

He also pointed out that we all make conscious assumptions when we think, this is a normal occurrence however, we ought to be able to move away from them when they become unjustifiable. That is why the contributions of the manager and staff involved in the conflict need to meet, brainstorm solutions as they go through the process of 'IDEAL'.

Therefore, the advantages of solution 2 would be a systematic approach to getting a resolution by getting the team involved, delegating where necessary, brainstorming to get a variety of ideas and solutions and be objective (MBO), management by objective.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report has looked at Problem solving and Decision making in the workplace where a specific problem has been identified, defined, options developed for resolution, evaluation and implementation of proposed solution developed.

The seven steps to problem solving provides a guide as well as the “IDEAL” strategy as a blueprint to follow by management in times of conflict. It is evident in the case-study provided of the conflict between the branch manager and staff that resolution can be reached by the use of the ‘Fishbone analysis’ to discover causes and effects of the conflict.

The manager is a decision maker in any workplace and the success of any team or organisation originates from good quality management (Adair, J. (2008).

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APPENDIX

(Fig. 1.1) Thomas-Kilmann's 5 Conflict Resolution Model.

(Fig. 2.1) The Bridge Model (safaribooksonline.com)

(Fig. 3.1) Fishbone Diagram ([adebomisalu, 2019](#))

(Fig. 4.1) IDEAL (slideshare.net)