PERSONNEL DYNAMICS

Facing Conflict: Tough Conversations

"When conflict is ignored– especially at the top– the result will be an enterprise that competes more passionately with itself than with its competitors."— Howard M. Guttman, *When Goliaths Clash*, 2003.

Managers spend an inordinate amount of time putting out fires, particularly interpersonal ones. A manager may spend 20 percent of his or her time managing conflict of one degree or another.
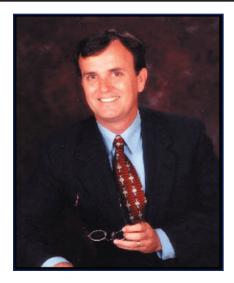
As long as Western culture values democratic processes and individual freedom, there will be those who are encouraged to debate. This is not necessarily a bad thing because innovative ideas often spring from those who refuse to "go along just to get along."

Conflict is not something to be suppressed in an organization, and is not to be ignored. Left alone, conflict and interpersonal stress only get worse. Eliminating conflict is not the answer. Companies that try that approach are as doomed to failure as those who try to ignore it.

Some predict that conflict is increasing in organizations because of the pressure on people to produce more and better with less. Uncertain job security, a fluctuating economy, the stress of technological advancements– along with a background of war and terrorism– provide more factors that put people on edge.

There is a strong link between the ability to resolve conflict effectively and perceived effectiveness as a leader. According to research from the Management Development Institute of Eckerd College, managers who resolve conflict by perspective taking, creating solutions, expressing emotions and reaching out are considered to be effective. Executives who demonstrate these behaviors are seen as successful and more suitable for promotion.

Conflict is normal and natural and can be a productive stimulant for creative processes. Managed well, it can motivate and energize individuals to stretch themselves, to be open to learning from others different from themselves, and to move beyond status quo operations.

Gerry Hoeffner is President of Personnel Dynamics Consulting, which specializes in Corporate Culture Enhancement, Change Management, Organizational Development, Sales and Customer Service Training.

Gerry has two decades of workforce development experience in a variety of fields including manufacturing, retail sales, financial services, and the medical field. Gerry travels throughout the U.S. speaking on issues involving business and the human element. He supplies educational and consulting services to managers, owners and employees aimed at implementing change, energizing the workforce and improving the performance of their teams.

He has been featured in HR Magazine for his work on the Workforce 2020 program. His "Best Places To Work" program was one of six recipients worldwide of the 2002 National Pinnacle Award from the Society of Human Resource Management.

To schedule Gerry to speak to your organization, or to bring the "Best Places To Work" program to your community, please visit his web site at www.PersonnelDynamics.net

Gerry Hoeffner
Personnel Dynamics Consulting
2601 Lazy Hammock Lane
Fort Pierce, Florida 34981
Office: 772-467-9212
www.PersonnelDynamics.net
Gerry@PersonnelDynamics.net

Three Sources of Conflict

Three factors contributing to conflict in organizations are:
1. Differences in behavior and communicating styles
2. Differences in priorities and values
3. Workplace conditions, including poor communications from leaders

Some personalities just seem to clash. It is important to determine why two people rub each other the wrong way. Do they have opposing behavior styles? For example, an introvert can be judged as hard to read and even untrustworthy to an extrovert who is open and expressive about everything. A time-conscious and highly organized individual can judge a more spontaneous person harshly and find that person's different priorities a source of irritation.

Understanding basic human differences can help people overcome being judgmental and can help them accept differences. Training in any of several assessment tools, for example MBTI, DISC, or 360's, is a good start. Attending workshops on behavior styles is another option. An extrovert can learn to ask questions to draw out an introvert in order to gain a better understanding. A highly organized person can learn to set more realistic deadlines for those who are less organized. Taking the time to understand basic differences can prevent personality clashes and conflict before these become on-going problems.

Expectations and Assumptions

People have different needs, values, beliefs, assumptions, experience levels, expectations and cultural frameworks. When people form expectations for the future (based on their experiences and interpretations of the past) their perceptions of reality can differ from one another, and conflict can arise.

It is necessary to explore expectations, assumptions, underlying values and priorities. This can be done openly in group or team sessions, individually by a manager or coach, or in small groups of conflicted individuals. When there is an elevated degree of conflict, it may be wise to do this with a professional trained in interpersonal skills and mediation communication.

Inquiring about values can help clarify issues. People don't get upset by things that don't matter to them. Behind every complaint there is an underlying value that is not being satisfied. Asking questions such as, "What's really important here?" often leads to uncovering competing values and conflicting priorities. Creating more authentic conversations by asking the right questions is the first step toward managing conflict.

Communication Skills

There are essentially three communication styles: non-assertive, assertive and aggressive. We all have a preferential habit or style of communicating, and we are capable of switching from one to another as appropriate. The problem is that we aren't always aware of the way others may perceive us. While we may think we are being appropriately assertive, someone else who is more sensitive or who harbors resentment may perceive us as aggressive. Add to the mix the fact that we all have personal agendas and it is easy to see how communications break down and breed conflict.

Executive Sources of Conflict

Executives contribute to conflict by being ambiguous in their communications– either intentionally or unintentionally. Most people have a tendency to avoid conflict. We sometimes "talk out of both sides of our mouth" and give mixed messages. The issues will sort themselves out in the end, we hope. At its worst, this communication style leads to increased conflict; at its best, to an organizational climate of non-commitment.

When executives stand up and declare war on barriers to candor, they are faced with new ideas but they may continue with old skills. The freedom to question and to confront is crucial but often inadequate. To overcome organizational barriers to candor and open communications, people must learn new skills in order to *ask the questions behind the questions*.

This may call for a professionally trained coach or consultant, external to the organization, who is unbiased. Executives may be standing too close to the blackboard to see their communication errors. Working with an executive coach can help correct one of the ways that an executive may be contributing to conflict without even knowing it.

Organizational Sources of Conflict

What conditions make a workplace fertile for conflict? An organization with a rigid hierarchical structure and an authoritarian leadership culture is fertile ground for conflict. Usually such places have a strong rumor mill, and open communications are not encouraged. There may be a poorly instituted reward and/or promotional system where unfair favoritism occurs.

Another source of conflict is limited resources. When managers have to compete with each other for resources, their competitive agendas can limit their abilities to get along with others for the benefit of the organization. They become more concerned with their own personal success or that of the business unit.

Change itself can destabilize relations, because people struggle when they are moved out of their comfort zones. Organizations that have been involved in mergers and/or acquisitions, for example, experience more conflict. Rapidly changing environments create a ripe atmosphere for stress, anxiety and conflict.

Four Ways to Cope with Conflict

When conflict occurs you can act in four different ways:

1. You can play the victim and act betrayed. You can complain to those who will listen and create alliances against the offending party. This rarely works in the business world, although most organizations have people actively engaging in such passive-aggressive behaviors rather than addressing conflict directly.

2. You can withdraw, either by physically leaving the situation, or by emotionally and mentally disengaging. This may involve walking out of a heated meeting, moving to a new unit or team, or quitting the company. A Gallup Organization survey reports that at any one time as many as 19 percent of an organization's employees are actively disengaged. Worse yet, over half (55 percent) are not engaged, but simply putting in time.

3. You can change yourself. Most people never even consider this option because it involves backing down from one's original stance. For people involved in personal battles, who are attached to core limiting beliefs, this is tantamount to failure. For others who are capable of looking at win-win possibilities, however, this option can open the door to creative solutions.

4. You can confront each other honestly, openly and candidly. While this is the preferred option, this is the most difficult to put into practice. This is because people are afraid of conflict and don't know how to work through issues successfully.

Keys to Managing Conflict

One of the most effective ways of facing conflict involves having realistic, open, and candid conversations. Asking the right questions to reveal underlying assumptions, expectations and values is essential. When conflict escalates, it must be addressed as soon as possible, before it becomes chronic or pervasive. Here are six keys to consider when addressing conflict:

1. Create rules of engagement. Establish procedures and rules for addressing conflict fairly.

2. Demonstrate the importance of caring. Nothing can be resolved without an atmosphere of trust. No one cares how much you know until they first know how much you care.

3. Depersonalize the issues. Focus on behaviors and the problems, not on personalities.

4. Don't triangulate or bring in political allies.

5. Know when to let it go.

6. Know when to bring in a professional mediator, coach or trainer.

Ten Tips for Difficult Communications

Here are suggested "Communication Strategies for Effective Leaders" from an interview with Phil Harkins, CEO of Linkage, Inc., in Link & Learn newsletter (http://www.linkageinc.com/newsletter/archives/leadership/q_and_a_phil_harkins_1102.shtml):

1. Listen without saying a word 70 percent of the time. Show that you understand what the other person is saying 20 percent of the time, either verbally and non-verbally. Ten percent of the time, ask questions in a skillful way that advances the conversation.
2. Become a people reader. Look carefully at the real message that someone is conveying by reading his or her expressions.
3. Focus not only on what someone is saying but also on what he or she is not saying.
4. Check in consistently to confirm what people are thinking, feeling, and believing. Don't assume you know what they mean.
5. Do not go into difficult conversations unprepared. First, think about where you want to end up; then, think about what's really going on; and only then, begin the process of designing an action plan.
6. You get what you want in communicating by first giving others what they need.
7. At the end of every important conversation, review the commitments.
8. Remember that it's imperfection that we most admire in each other. Be courageously authentic and honest.
9. Always start with the other person's agenda.
10. Practice the art of saying to a person when they make a point, "Tell me more."

People who practice honest and candid conversations are perceived as more effective and more suitable for promotion. Every conversation is a means of developing trust and commitment. Asking meaningful questions about what really matters results in relationships that are more authentic. Conflict is averted because people have a chance to say what they really mean.

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