

10 Steps to Managing Conflict at Work

Introduction

Conflict arises when one or more person tries to ensure their preferred outcome is achieved to the exclusion of the preferred outcome of others. In examining the area of conflict more closely, the issues causing the conflict need to be examined aswell as the behaviour of both parties and then finally the feelings which result based on how people feel they have been dealt with. Often it is the behaviour and consequent feelings which cause the longer term and deeper damage to the relationship than the actual issue itself. Therefore, in managing conflict, these aspects need to be understood and resolved aswell as dealing with the issue that may have caused the original conflict.

Reactions to Conflict

The ways in which we deal with conflict are based on the following...

The situation arises when there is a clash between differing priorities and preferred outcomes. The outcome that then results can lead to how each party feels following the interaction. Often the person does not have control over the situation or issue causing conflict, but the key area they can influence is their own behaviour. By focusing on behaviour, each person can affect the outcome of an interaction and the feelings which then result. Typically there are 3 broad approaches to dealing with conflict some of which were outlined by Thomas Kilman. These include :

Fight - Achieving personal goals becomes the driving force when interacting with others at work or in a particular situation. The person in this case will not concede any of their own preferred outcomes. This style can be used when the individual needs of the person are too important to compromise on. There are also people who use this style predominantly regardless of how important the issue is as they see each conflict as a threat and a potential power struggle.

Avoid This behaviour can result from a fear of confrontation which the person using the style may have. They may use this approach as a way also of maintaining the relationship as they may not be confident enough to confront the cause of the conflict. This style can also be used when one person feels there is nothing to gain by dealing with the cause of the conflict and they therefore choose to avoid any confrontation. Also it can be used when emotions are running high and the timing may be better to wait before confronting the other person.

Resolve In using this approach when dealing with the conflict, both parties try to resolve the disagreement in a way that is mutually beneficial. In this instance , both sets of needs are deemed to be equally important and dealt with accordingly. Resolution can be achieved when both people involved agree to compromise as a way of moving forward. . Alternatively , it may also be possible to reach agreement by collaborting. This approach ensures both sets of needs are met without compromise through joint problem solving.

Causes of Conflict

There are many causes of conflict within the organisation and these include..

1. Poor organisation structures where people may feel alienated or isolated, thus the spirit of competitiveness and non cooperation may be strong.
2. Poor communication where communication lines are poor and people do not have the opportunity to express how they feel or to clear up causes of conflict which may arise.

3. Personality conflicts which happen when people clash with each other due to different styles of interaction or differing values or beliefs.
4. Change - when there is a lot of change within the organisation which is poorly managed , this can lead to people feeling insecure and threatened. The tension which this then causes can lead to frustration and anger which in turn affects how people deal with one another at work.
5. Lack of teamwork /poor performance - this can be another cause of conflict if some in the team believe other colleagues are not pulling their weight or are not competent in the jobs they do.

Overall, conflict often arises when there is a non - acceptance of the differences which exist between people at work. It is also more likely to happen in organisations where there is a high level of uncertainty or where there is poor industrial relations. The atmosphere that this causes can often result in a raising of tension levels and consequently poor relationships at work.

Effects of Conflict

Conflict can potentially result where two or more people interact with each other and because of their behaviour or due to a clash of interests, conflict or tension can arise. There are also positive aspects associated with conflict as it enables feelings to be expressed whilst recognising there are often different views or perspectives. Conflict becomes a more serious problem when it is not dealt with effectively or at all and where the feelings which result are not expressed or resolved. The negative effects of conflict are that communication breaks down , individual needs are not heard or met, creativity is stagnated and relationships with others usually deteriorate. Therefore, organisations which don't encourage the effective resolution of conflict wil usually have lower staff morale , strained relationships , higher levels of fear and tension among staff and lower productivity.

Managing Yourself

One underlying principle which needs to be clear before looking at the 10 steps is that we have most influence over our own behaviour when dealing with others. By focusing on our own style, we may indirectly influence the way others deal with us. In other words, the way we think affects how we feel in a situation , which is turn determines our behaviour in a particular situation. In this way when we control our thoughts , we are more likely to affect a positive outcome when dealing with conflict . By focusing on developing ourselves and modifying our behaviour , we can learn to become more powerful when dealing with conflict in our lives.

10 Practical Steps to Managing Conflict more Effectively

1. Decide when it is important to confront the other person . In some instances it may not be worthwhile as the issue may not be important to you or it may be worth giving in on the issue in the interest of the longer term relationship. The key here is that you believe you have the choice as to how you deal with the conflict and in this way you are in control and should feel powerful in conflict situations.
2. Picture the situation as you would like it to be and how you see the conversation with the other person going. Visualise yourself dealing with the other person successfully and put as much detail into the visualisation as you can. By playing these success tapes , you are more likely to deal effectively with the other person. Try to avoid catastrophising or imagining the worst possible outcome as this will reduce your power in dealing with the conflict.

3. Practise assertiveness. Focus on expressing how you feel in a way that is not aggressive. Describe the behaviour of the other person and the effect of their behaviour on you and then what you need them to do differently in the future to avoid further conflicts eg.
"You made a comment about my department at the meeting today which made it appear that I didn't know what was going on in my department. I am disappointed, angry etc. and in future I would ask you to make any comments you may have to me directly."
By using this approach ,the power lies with the assertive person as he/she expresses his/her feelings and decides what action is needed from the other person to take to ensure their needs are respected in the future. This approach differs from aggression as the focus is on solving the problem without offending the other person or damaging the relationship.
4. Step back - try to look objectively at the conflict. Don't deal with the issue when you are very angry or emotional. In stepping back , put yourself in the other person's position and try to see the problem from his/her point of view. When you feel calmer, approach the other person , thus ensuring you are in control. In this way you can avoid becoming aggressive or emotional and remain focused on the issues and the facts.
5. Explore the concerns of the other person. Assess the current situation by asking questions and try to avoid making statements about our point of view until the other person's position is clearly understood. Although this may be very difficult to do in reality, it ensures the other person feels their position has been heard and therefore be more open to listening to yours. If you find that you are not then being heard, remind the other person of how you heard and understood their position and how you need to have the same treatment. Remember also that the only thing other people know about us is our behaviour as they don't necessarily understand the feelings underlying the behaviour.
6. Focus on issues rather than personalities. Try not to personalise the discussion. Instead focus on the issues causing conflict as opposed to any personality factors. Also, in doing this watch for any signals you may be getting from the other person which might indicate how they really feel eg. body language, tone of voice etc.
7. Invite a free expression of feelings/frustrations regarding the conflict from the other person once a safe environment has been created. To do this, the boundaries or controls need to be clear where both people understand the goal or desired outcome and the need to say how they feel without being interrupted as a first step to gaining understanding.
8. Ask why the other person cares about the outcome and what needs are threatened for them by the conflict. Choose then which strategy is appropriate for you in terms of the outcome and how your needs compare to those of the other person eg. accommodating, avoiding, competing etc.
9. Brainstorm - look for a way forward by jointly brainstorming possible solutions or alternatives. Encourage all those involved in the conflict to participate and share their ideas.
10. Agree an action plan . Who will do what , when and how. Monitor progress and review within an agreed period. Move on from the conflict once it has been resolved.

Once the conflict has been dealt with both parties should try to develop their working relationship in the future by building on the experience gained . If the issue has been tackled and resolved, it can be a means to actually developing the depth of understanding which two people have for each other and towards building respect towards each other in the future. So, although dealing with conflict may be difficult for many of us, it is an essential skill to develop to ensure our needs are understood and met at work aswell as understanding and working with others in a harmonious way.

Conflict resolution is about taking personal responsibility and not allowing tension and bad feeling to build up and damage the relationship. It may be difficult to do , but by coaching ourselves by using some of the points outlined earlier and learning from each experience, we can ensure we grow and develop in all our interpersonal relationships.