

## CONFLICT: MANAGEMENT, RESOLUTION & PREVENTION



The CIPD report, *Leadership and the Management of Conflict at Work* (Oct 2008) identified the following as the top four causes of conflict at work:

- **Warring egos and personality clashes**
- **Poor Leadership**
- **Inadequate line management**
- **Weak performance management**

When we have shown this to managers, without exception, we get nods of recognition. It takes time to resolve conflict and the general rule is 'deal with it early'. Respondents also reported that conflict, when not addressed early had tangible effects on the organisation, such as increased absenteeism. However, if conflict is managed effectively, the following benefits are achieved:

- Reduction in disciplinary and grievance cases
- Better team performance and productivity
- Reduction in tribunal claims
- Reduction in employee turnover

In these challenging economic times we've been increasingly asked to assist in helping people work through conflict and to put in place preventative strategies for the future.

Over the last few months we have worked on assignments such as:

- Resolving a conflict of personalities at director level which threatened the growth strategy of the parent company.
- Facilitating workshops to promote team-working following a major organisational restructure.
- Through one-to-one coaching, providing executives and managers with opportunities to evaluate and rehearse strategies for dealing with potentially 'explosive' situations.
- Training staff in conflict management so that disagreements can be dealt with 'in the moment' and prevented from escalating into damaging situations.

If you are reading this and thinking, 'I've got a situation like that', then you might find the following hints and tips useful:

### Hints and tips for managing conflict

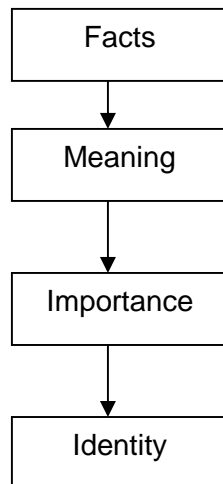
Conflict is different from disagreement. Disagreement can be positive because it can boost creative thinking. Debate and discussion between parties with different views can lead to new, novel solutions. Peter Senge, in his book, 'The Fifth Discipline' talks about organisations which value 'creative tension'. Conflict is different from this. Conflict is generally characterised by:

- People feeling stuck or at an impasse.
- An escalation beyond the immediate situation.
- A feeling that it is personal – the person feels personally under threat or attacked
- A lack of trust between parties which can lead to other consequences such as 'second guessing', game playing, 'hidden agendas', forming of cliques.

### How conflict escalates:

When people talk with each other, there is much more going on than an exchange of information. For a conversation to be useful there obviously needs to be an exchange of information (facts). But each

person can place a different meaning on those facts. The particular meaning that someone gives a fact will also make it more or less important to them. If it is particularly important, they may feel that there is a bit of 'self' connected with that fact. (Think about how passionate people can get when talking about politics or religion!)



Conflict situations, if not handled effectively, can quickly escalate from a discussion about facts to a defence of identity. It has become a battle for survival. While any conflict will be resolved at the level of 'facts', a skilled facilitator will be sensitive to the deeper, hidden messages. Often it what is *not* being said that can make the difference. A skilled facilitator pays attention to the meanings and values of the parties in conflict.

#### **Some principles for resolving conflict:**

- Deal with conflict early, as it appears. Do not deny that it is happening.
- Avoid the conflict from moving from 'facts' to personalities, otherwise it becomes a battle for survival.
- Avoid conflict becoming positional. This only emphasises the gap between the parties and causes people to entrench their view. It emphasises 'stuckness' not movement. Instead, keep the conversation dynamic by focusing on completing the common task.
- If you are acting as a third party facilitator, stay in 'process' rather than 'content'. That is, don't get involved in the argument, but instead focus on what has to be done for both parties to resolve the issue.

#### **A process for resolving conflict:**

##### **Step1: Assume that both parties are normal human beings**

They both something to say that they feel is important to them. They've not just arrived from Planet Zob, nor have they lost their marbles. (They might just be going about things in an unhelpful way!)

##### **Step 2: Take any negative energy out of the situation**

Show them that you understand.

Let them feel heard.

Use defusing questions, reflection, summarising and match values.

**Step 3: Agree what is the task to be done**

Define the task to be done in such a way that both parties can sign up to it. (They must have something in common, otherwise they wouldn't be arguing!)

If appropriate, write it down and keep it in view of both parties as you move forward.

Establish the consequences of doing nothing, if you need to build commitment to reaching a resolution.

**Step 4: Gather the facts**

Let each party say everything they need to say that is relevant to the completion of the task.

Stay in *facts*, not opinions or judgements.

**Step 5: Establish the consequences of the potential solution.**

Check the implications to each party and other people/tasks/operations etc of the proposed solution.

**Step 6: Agree the course of action and summarise.**

Leave actions with the two parties concerned.

Get them to summarise what each of them are going to do, and by when.

**Step 7: Test commitment of both parties to the solution.**

Finish with a closed question to which you are looking for a 'Yes' response. E.g. 'So, are you happy to do this?' or 'Are you really going to do this?'

You will find the following skills helpful in dealing effectively with conflict:

- Listening skills.
- Being able to reflect back someone else's experience by putting yourself in their shoes.
- Reading what is not being said.
- Staying out of personalities and focusing on facts.
- Being able to build agreement by emphasising what the parties have in common.
- Preventing positional thinking and keeping the conversation dynamic.
- Asking questions which can take negative energy out of highly charged situations.

**Please let us know how you used these hints & tips and what others you would find useful**

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