



Editor's Note...

Conflict is a natural and integral part of all aspects of our life. In itself, conflict is not always a pleasant experience but it can be a constructive and value adding one. If effectively understood, it can be managed by reaching a consensus that meets the needs of the parties involved so that all 'win'. This in turn, can lead to strengthened relationships, growth and innovation, new ways of thinking, additional management options and changes in behaviour and approach.

The **key ingredients of conflict are:** **Needs** – Needs are things that are essential to our wellbeing. Conflicts arise when we ignore others' needs, our own needs or the group's needs. **Perceptions** - People interpret reality differently, differences which could easily result in conflict. **Power** - How people define and use power is an important influence on the number and types of conflicts that occur. This also influences how conflict is managed. **Values** - Values are beliefs or principles we consider to be very important. Serious conflicts arise when people hold incompatible values or when values are not clear. **Feelings and emotions** - Many people let their feelings and emotions become a major influence over how they deal with conflict. Conflicts can also occur because people ignore their own or others' feelings and emotions.

In this issue of E-HR Trends we look at some of the aspects of conflict management and put forward simple strategies for effectively resolving conflict. We hope you will find the information set out insightful and useful, enjoy the read!

CONFLICT

Publications Committee - Editor: Chris Mathas

IMMUNIZE YOUR ORGANIZATION AGAINST SUPERCONFLICTS

An article written by Ruth Sirman; summary by Ianthi Psilogenis

"Inadequate efforts to resolve conflicts when they first erupt set the stage for additional onsets of conflict that become increasingly resistant to resolution."

The author puts forward a specific structured process that can be adopted in order to avoid this from happening and which aims at: (1) early identification of how the history, traditions and culture of the client group, as well as the underlying patterns and relationships that are feeding into the conflict (2) convincing those involved that the resolution process will be safe and productive, for them to be willing to participate.

Intake – The first point of contact with the client (manager or HR professional) aims at getting their description of events in order to identify the requirements of the organization (team).

Engagement - This stage has to do with convincing leadership, management and employees that the conflict-resolution process is indeed reliable and that it won't have any negative implications on their careers.

Assessment and Feedback – Information must be gathered from as many people as possible to form a fair and realistic view of the situation. Once this is done, feedback must be provided to the whole group in a way that:- a) reflects what is working and what isn't, b) avoids pointing the finger at any individual, c) does not threaten confidentiality (nothing should be traced to an individual).

Agreement on next steps – Here the group decides what they want to do with the information gathered and are provided with several options from the mediators.

Intervention – The intervention process may involve conflict-resolution training or conflict-management processes. Those involved should know what to expect from the process and what is expected of them, be aware of the safeguards that exist to ensure the process is constructive and fair.

Implementation – The group must agree on which option to use for solving the problem. To reach such an agreement, certain questions must be addressed and Sirman provides a list of them.

Conflict Resolution Strategies



1) Avoidance

Avoidance is useful, if there is no pressing need to resolve differences now or in the future. Generally, this is not a useful long term strategy as the workplace is never small enough to avoid someone completely!

2) Accommodation

Allowing the other person's needs to be met, usually at the expense of your own. Useful if you don't care about the issue, or if you have little power in the relationship or situation. Being too accommodating too often can weaken your position to the point where your voice is never heard.

3) Compromise

Is giving up some ground in order to gain other ground elsewhere. Useful if time is tight, or if it's not worth exploring things more fully. Also, useful when one party can't force their solution on the other.

(cont. p2)

Definition of Conflict

A conflict is a situation between two or more people in which one person perceives that another person has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first person cares about. This definition of conflict contains three elements, all of which must be present in order for a conflict to exist:

1) there is a specific perception on part of one or more of the people involved in the conflict which may or may not be accurate.

2) the perception is generally negative i.e. one party believes the other party is going to do something that will have a negative impact in some direct or indirect way.

3) The issue surrounding the conflict must be something that both parties care about.

Based on this definition, not all disagreements are conflicts.

Conflict Resolution Strategies (cont.)

4) Competition
The flip-side of accommodation - it's about making sure your own needs are met, no matter the cost. This win-lose approach is useful if there is an important deadline to meet, or if the relationship with the other party is not important. However, steam-rolling your way around the workplace may get things done, but there will be an army of people who won't catch you if you fall.

5) Collaboration
Is a road not often travelled, as it can be long and requires some skill and effort. Collaboration is about assuming positive intent and seeing things from all sides, in detail. It's about acknowledging and accepting differences and exploring alternative solutions that meet everyone's needs and concerns. It is a useful conflict management strategy when the issues are important to everyone, and all sides need to be committed to the solution.

IMMUNIZE YOUR ORGANIZATION AGAINST SUPERCONFLICTS *(continued)*

Evaluation and monitoring – Here criteria are set for measuring the level of success of the intervention process and also determining the type of corrective action that will be taken.

In addition to the above, Sirman stresses the importance of encouraging ownership and responsibility for the process on the part of those involved.

The article ends with a real-life application of the conflict-resolution process described above, during a corporate restructuring that involved at least 200 people who were scattered geographically throughout the country providing an excellent case study.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AS A CORE COMPETENCY FOR HR PROFESSIONALS

An article written by M. Guttman; summary by Ianthi Psilogeni

In this article, the key assumption is that conflict occurs in all types of workplaces, from Fortune 500 companies to small family-owned businesses and can work for or against an organization, depending on how it is managed. If not managed at all, the consequences can be quite detrimental to an organization, since studies have shown that conflict not only polarizes co-workers but destroys morale, decreases job commitment and inevitably reduces productivity. The most striking statistic is that managers spend at least 25% of their time resolving workplace conflicts. If, however, conflict is managed effectively, it can be a source of great creativity and consequently successful business results.

The cases Guttman focuses on involve workplace conflict within team-members. Specifically, he proposes a recipe for workplace conflict management which focuses on the way conflict is viewed by the organization and the use of effective conflict management skills.

Guttman proposes that organizations can develop a healthy view of conflict through the use of the "Stage Development Wheel" which consists of four key stages:

Stage 1 Testing: Teams are underperforming; members remain wary of one another and maintain a façade; conflict is "buried" and issues are not dealt with openly.

Stage 2 Infighting: As members become more familiar with another, they stop pretending and behave more authentically. Conflict is no longer hidden and is likely to increase.

Stage 3 Getting Organized: the roles of all members are clarified, the common goals determined, the conflict-management skills developed, the decision-making and approval processes established and the feedback on their behavior provided.

Stage 4 High Performance: Teams have learnt how to turn conflict into healthy confrontation and eventually good business results.

Teams may remain stuck, oscillating between Stages 1 or 2 for years, unless someone intervenes to help to reach an "alignment" (stage 3) by agreeing on five key areas (Key Alignment Factors): The business strategy, the operational goals that flow from the business strategy, the accountabilities of each team member and of the team as a whole, protocols on how conflict should be dealt with and decisions made, business relationships (having mutual expectations)

After the initial alignment, the organization's HR department adopts the role of assessing and advising the team. Where misalignment in any of these areas is detected, HR ensures that the team receives the skills necessary to reach complete alignment, through formal workshops, informal on-job feedback sessions, full-team coaching or individual coaching sessions.

Overall, through its involvement in the above process of conflict management, HR makes a significant contribution to the health and effectiveness of its organization and this in turn raises the stature of the HR function to that of strategic contributor.

Source: Guttman Development Strategies Inc



"If we manage conflict constructively, we harness its energy for creativity and development."
Kenneth Kaye

"Conflict lies at the core of innovation."
Emanuel R. Piore

"Our ultimate freedom is the right and power to decide how anybody or anything outside ourselves will affect us."
Stephen Covey



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