

# **PREVENTING AND MANAGING CONFLICTS IN THE WORKPLACE**

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## **Introduction:**

Conflict is a human phenomenon. It is part of our existence. There is no way we can avoid conflict. Hence, it is better to accept it as a way of life, see how we can live with it and make it more positive than negative. There are many reasons why conflicts occur in the workplace. Even the most enlightened among us might actually be the source of some of it. How do we start off our day? What outside influences do we allow to get into our psyche? We can, inadvertently, bring our morning edginess into the office along with our low tolerance for disagreement or opposition.

When conflict happens, morale gets lowered and absenteeism goes up undermining your creativity and productivity. But all conflict is not destructive. Sometimes it can be a sign of commitment to a cause or a passion about something positive. There can be a silver lining around every conflict when we understand what it is and how to turn it around. Like any other workplace, yours is filled with individuals having different personalities, needs, values, and expectations. It is naive to think there will be no conflicts. The trick is turning them into an asset to your organization and not a liability. Creativity, collaboration, and improvement can be the result of conflict when resolved intelligently.

Conflicts exist and will continue to exist. Unresolved conflict is where the damage is done. And

it does not just affect the two people involved in the conflict. it will affect their colleagues and sometimes their bosses.

The word “conflict” originated in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century from the Latin word “conflictus” meaning a contest, to strike together<sup>1</sup>. It is defined as a situation in which there are opposing ideas, opinions, feelings or wishes; a situation in which it is difficult to choose<sup>2</sup>.

Hence, workplace conflict is regarded as the discord that occurs when goals, interest or values of co-workers are incompatible<sup>3</sup>.

Conflicts are inevitable; each of us needs to develop the skills necessary to manage it constructively. The good news is that when properly managed, conflict provides a chance for us to learn from each other, to improve our work methods, and to build team solidarity. Managing Workplace Conflict will help you handle conflict confidently so you get positive results.

The objective of this topic is therefore designed to help participants identify causes of conflicts, its effects and appreciate various methods of managing conflict in the workplace so as to improve efficiency and productivity in the workplace. It will also cover conventional and alternative approaches to conflicts management. It will show you how you can make conflict an organizational resource that sparks innovation and improves organizational efficiency and effectiveness. You will learn how to build trust, promote respect and foster consensus within the workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> Origin of Conflict, [www.dictionary.reference.com](http://www.dictionary.reference.com), accessed on the 2/03/2016 at 11.06am.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Oxford University Press, p. 305

<sup>3</sup> Esquivel, M.A and Kleiner, B.H., (1997), The Importance of Conflict in Work Team Effectiveness: Team Performance Manager, Pp 5-15.

## UNDERSTANDING CONFLICTS

When we are in conflict, we all say things we don't mean and mean things we don't say. Only rarely do we communicate at a deep level what we really, honestly feel. We seldom speak from our hearts or expose our most vulnerable levels of being, or do so in ways the other person can hear. Why do we fall into this trap? Why is it so hard to do what we know is right?

Our conflicts have the capacity to confuse and hypnotize us and we come to believe there is no way out other than battle. Conflict possesses a dark, hypnotic, destructive power; the power of attachment when it is time to leave, the power of demonization, when it is time to forgive, the power of articulate speech when it is time to be silent or to listen. Conflict alternately strokes and crushes our egos, fuels and exhausts our will, energizes us and freezes us in fear. It speaks to a deep, ancient part of our souls that thirsts for power and delights in revenge.

When we are engaged in conflict, our emotions become enormously powerful and overwhelming. When we experience strong emotions, they feel limitless and unstoppable, irresistible and all defining. Part of the seduction of strong emotion is that it encourages us to define ourselves and what we want in absolute terms, to identify with the seemingly infinite power of our feelings, to surrender control to something larger than ourselves.

We have all experienced times in our lives when we lacked the skills we need to communicate honestly and empathically with others. We have all been aggressive, judgmental and hypercritical or passive, apathetic and defensive. Our efforts at honesty have been interpreted as attack and our empathy as weakness. We have not known how to manage our anger with compassion, how to listen to the other persons pain when we were been attacked, how to discover what caused the other person to act as they did, how to take responsibility for our own

miscommunication and conflicts. We have felt trapped in our conflicts that there was no exit, no way out.

At the same time, we have resisted apologizing for our behavior, acknowledging that we have miscommunicated, or recognizing that our feelings originated with us and often have nothing to do with the other person. We have become trapped in self denial, simply by focusing exclusively on what the other person did. Yet we may have been in conflict because we felt rejected or did not stand up for ourselves or felt insecure or upset by criticism, or were ashamed of our own cowardice or did not have the skills to respond effectively to the other people's behaviour.

Instead of facing our own internal reasons for been upset, we become angry with others, claiming our cause as noble and right. We describe our conflicts in terms of injustice, unfairness, harassment, aggression, dishonesty, evil rejection and inequality as opposed to been about petty incidents. We are seduced by the apparent importance of our conflicts and hypnotized by the adversarial process. We feel cleansed when we transform our narrow, petty concerns into strong feelings.

In the process, we miss the truth that these petty concerns can be transcended by increasing our awareness of the deeper reasons that caused them. We can rise above them by been honest with others about what is really bothering us, by genuinely listening to people with whom we disagree and learning from them. We can let go of our emotional investment in the continuation of the fighting and discover solutions.

## SIGNS OF CONFLICT

Many people deal in negative ways with the tension that often results from conflict. They develop negative styles of conflict that affect everyone, not just those directly involved in the conflict situation.

The following is a list of some negative conflict signs. As you read the list, check off the signs you have observed in your work setting. Then consider the negative impact these signs have on the entire organization. These signs of conflict are hard on everyone, not just those who are directly involved in the conflict.

- ❖ **Firecracker:** In the midst of a conversation or meeting, someone blows up in sudden anger. Later, the person apologizes profusely but you know it will happen again.
- ❖ **Cold Shoulder:** Two people take pride in not communicating with each other. They are having a contest to see who can last longer without talking about the conflict.
- ❖ **Backstabbing:** Someone is congenial to you when face to face. Later, talking to others, this person criticizes you viciously.
- ❖ **Memory Lane:** As two people discuss a conflict, one brings up a painful, unresolved issue from the past. In the heat of emotions, they forget the current problem.
- ❖ **Social zinger:** Someone throws verbal darts at you when other people are around. You can't figure out what the real point is because this person claims, "I was just teasing."
- ❖ **Trivial Fights:** Two people battle over tiny decisions. They never get to the real issue, which is difficult to bring up.

❖ **Having the Last Word:** At the end of a conflict resolution, one person has to get in one last stinging remark before walking away, you realize that the conflict isn't really over<sup>4</sup>.

Did you check some or all of the signs above? The list seems to cover a lot of ground from exploding to refusing to talk, and everything in between. Actually, these signs of conflict have a common core which is denial. In a conflict situation, denial occurs when you use your energy in some way other than talking with the key person about the key issue. The result is that things get worse. The atmosphere is filled with suspicion and fear<sup>5</sup>.

## **CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE**

Employee's conflict in the workplace is a common occurrence resulting from differences in employee's personalities and values. Dealing with employee's conflict in a timely manner is important to maintaining a healthy work environment. Believing that a conflict will simply disappear is an inaccurate assumption to make because simple conflicts can grow into major problems if not dealt with appropriately. Managers should understand the common causes of employees' conflicts, so that an appropriate solution can be applied before the issues become unmanageable. I have therefore categorized causes of workplace conflicts into three types. They are:

### **1. Resource Workplace Conflict**

This occurs when one or more persons within an organization compete for the same property, if resources are very scarce, people will always have to compete for them and the end result will

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<sup>4</sup> Lebedun, J., (1998), *Managing Workplace Conflict*, Coastal Training Technologies Corp, Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA, pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Ahuja, P et al., (2006), *Communication Skills: How to Resolve Conflicts*, Mindex Publishing Co. Ltd, Benin City, pp48-84

lead to conflict. This boils down to the classic argument between the haves and the have-nots. Resource workplace conflicts can be an imagined conflict that is complicated by power perception, or it can be a real conflict over items necessary to complete a job function or task. For example, an office with one computer that is shared between several employees may cause employees to argue over whose turn it is to use the computer. Another resource conflict occurs when employees perceive that the other personnel are receiving more attention or recognition from the boss.

## 2. Style Workplace Conflict

This occurs when two or more persons disagree regarding an approach or method to a workplace goal or task. This conflict is often referred to as “personality conflict”. Stating that an argument is a personality conflict creates the automatic assumption that the conflict cannot be resolved because people generally are incapable of altering their personality. A more appropriate approach is to recognize that the conflict is one of style because a style can be altered. This conflict occurs commonly when individuals must work in a close proximity environment and are unable to properly communicate. Since style is related to viewpoint, the style workplace conflict is often characterized by lack of synchronization regarding the goal or assignment that the employees are attempting to achieve. The pattern of conflict can then develop quickly. One employee may feel burdened and the other employee may feel ostracized especially during intense and high value projects<sup>6</sup>.

## 3. Perception Workplace Conflict

This commonly arises from altering perception. This is especially true where a resource or style workplace conflict already exist. For example two employees fighting or competing over the

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<sup>6</sup> Baker, L.L., et al, (1987), *Groups in Process: An Introduction to Small Group Communication*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

same resources may perceive the intervention of a third employee differently. One employee will likely welcome the assistance or intervention while another employee will perceive it as an insult to intelligence and capability. Perception conflicts are exasperated by verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, office rumours about one person's performance review or an abrupt memo stating unhappy client's comments can create the workplace perception conflict. In particular, comments regarding who is the boss's favourite or which team is most valuable in the organization can create a negative perception fuelled by rumours<sup>7</sup>.

These issues are some of the direct cause of conflicts in the workplace. However, the causes of conflict can lie dormant for years only to suddenly flare up.

## **EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE CONFLICTS**

While it takes time to resolve workplace conflicts, it also takes time not to resolve them. If we consider the time and money we spend on unresolved conflicts, it is usually far in excess of the time and money it would take to sit down and work out solutions. This is particularly true in workplace conflicts. Here is an example:

I have better things to do with my time than to argue with somebody that won't do her fair share of the work complains one office mate and no one will call her to order. It seems that someone is always mad at someone else or refusing to work with him or her. What is this all about anyway?

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<sup>7</sup> Fae, R., Workplace Conflict Resolution, [www.lifescrpt.com/workplace\\_conflict\\_resolution.com](http://www.lifescrpt.com/workplace_conflict_resolution.com), Accessed on 8/3/2016 at 1:48pm.

It is all about conflict, a normal and natural part of our workplace and personal lives. Conflict can be helpful in making necessary changes within the workplace. However, unresolved conflict can result in feelings of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, hopelessness, depression, and other emotions. It can result in behaviors such as physical or emotional withdrawal, resignation from jobs, dissolution of personal relations, aggression, and even violence. Underneath are some effects of workplace conflicts:

1. Decrease in productivity

When an organization spends much of its time dealing with conflicts, employees take time away from focusing on the core goals they are tasked with achieving. Conflicts cause employees to focus less on the projects at hand and more on venting their frustrations. As a result the organization can lose money and access to essential resources.

2. Reduced quality of decision

Decisions made under conditions of conflict are always inferior to decisions made when cooperation's prevails. This is true for two reasons. First, we know that good decisions are based on an optimum quantity and quality of objective information. If information is withheld or distorted by those who are expected to provide it, then the decision cannot be credible and reliable.

Secondly, where there is conflict between people who share decision making authority, as in the case of team based decisions, the resulting decisions are likely to be tainted by the power struggles between those in authority. A precise estimate of cost is probably impossible. But ask yourself, what opportunities were lost by poor decisions that were affected by this conflict and what might have been gained if a better decision had been made.

### 3. Violence

When conflicts escalate without mediation, intense situations may arise between colleagues. It is unfortunate, but workplace conflicts may cause violence amongst employees resulting in legal problems for the employee and possibly the organization<sup>8</sup>.

### 4. Loss of skilled employee

Workplace conflicts is a decisive factor in more than 50% of employees departures<sup>9</sup>

### 5. Lowered job motivation

From time to time, most employees experience erosion of job motivation due to the stress of trying to get along with a “difficult colleague”.

### 6. Lost time work

Absenteeism has been shown to correlate with job stress, especially the stress associated with anger towards a co-worker. This stress combined with disregard for how ones absence impacts others leads to employees choosing to take off sometimes excused as a “sick day”. And medical science has shown that nearly every physical illness and injury from viral infections to cancer to workplace accidents are partially “psychogenic”. That is, they are caused in part by psychological or emotional conditions<sup>10</sup>.

### 7. Mental Health Concerns

Conflict within a workplace can cause employees to become frustrated if they feel as if there is no solution in sight, or if they feel that their opinions go unrecognized by the other staff. As a result stress paves in. This adversely affects their professional lives. Employees may have problems sleeping, loss of appetite or overeating, headaches and become unapproachable. In

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<sup>8</sup> Brookins, M., The Effects of Conflict Within an Organization, (2016), Demand Media, Houston chronicle, Houston, Texas, pp2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Erin, J., MSW, LCSW: (2011), Workplace Conflict is Expensive, CFR Mediation Blog.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

some instances, employees may avoid departmental meetings to prevent themselves from experiencing stress and stress related symptoms.

#### 8. Punctures team spirit

The workplace sometimes relies on teams to complete special projects or even carry out the routine functions of a department. If members of the team do not co-operate, it may not be clear what roles and responsibilities each member must assume. Some task might overlap while others might be overlooked completely leading to confusion and conflict between team members and the ultimate failure to achieve objectives.

#### 9. Restructuring

Design of workflow is altered in an attempt to reduce the amount of interaction required between employees in conflict. Unfortunately, the restructured work is usually less efficient than the original design which would have been satisfactory if the conflicting employees had been able to work together.

#### 10. Property Damage, Theft and Sabotage

Studies show a direct link between employee conflict, damage and theft of equipment and inventory, sabotage of work processes. This usually occurs when employees are angry at their employer<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Duxburg and Higgins: Work Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millennium: A Status Report, 2003, p.15.

## **MANAGING CONFLICTS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Have you ever had a disagreement with a colleague? You probably have at one time or another. Workplace conflicts are very common; there are very few offices where all the employees get along. Because of this, conflict management is a necessary component of the workplace, and those in leadership position must be skilled in conflict management techniques. When conflicts go unaddressed, they can have a negative impact on productivity and teamwork.

What type of workplace conflict requires intervention? Anything that disrupts the office, impacts on productivity or poses a threat to other employees needs to be addressed. The degree to which you tolerate a situation before intervention may vary. A manager may not feel it necessary to intervene when a minor exchange of words occurs between employees--unless such an incident becomes a daily occurrence and expands beyond the employees initially involved. However, a situation where one employee threatens another requires immediate action. When handling conflict, some basic guidelines apply.

### **❖ Open communication:**

The workplace setting is fertile breeding ground for conflicts because of the dynamics and interdependency of management-to-employee, employee-to-employee, and employee-to-outside vendor relationships. Recognizing and addressing the factors that give rise to the potential for conflict can have a positive impact on workplace and the productivity in the workplace. It is all about conflict in the workplace. Is it avoidable? Is it preventable? Is it necessary? The answer to all of these questions is “yes”.

To manage workplace conflict effectively you must be a skilled communicator. That includes creating an open communication environment in your unit by encouraging employees to talk about work issues. Listening to employee concerns will foster an open environment. Make sure you really understand what employees are saying by asking questions and focusing on their perception of the problem. Whether you have two employees who are fighting for the desk next to the window or one employee who wants the air conditioner on and another who doesn't, your immediate response to conflict situations is essential.

Communication is both the cause of and the remedy for conflict. Understanding how to effectively communicate, and how to satisfactorily manage workplace conflicts can lead to a happier, more productive life. Communication skills must be learned. Most often, poor communication and conflict management styles must be corrected and replaced with approaches that are more conducive to creating peace in the workplace.

Most people fear conflict and see it as something to avoid. In fact, conflict is a normal and natural part of our lives, both professionally and personally. Conflict in the right setting, handled in the right way, can be beneficial. It is through conflict that an awareness of the need for some necessary changes can be made<sup>12</sup>.

❖ **Be Impartial:**

Don't take sides! In a leadership position, you shouldn't display any sort of opinion that favors one person over another. try to access the situation from all sides to come up with a fair and reasonable solution. Promote Teamwork: Encouragement and motivation are powerful. Remind

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<sup>12</sup> Graham, M.A. and Lebron, M.J., (1994), The Horizontal Revolution: Reengineering your organization through Teams, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, C.A., p.5.

your staff of successful projects that required teamwork to complete. This is one of the most effective conflict resolution techniques which will really make the employees to think about the importance of working as a team.

❖ **Broadcast Praise:**

The power of encouragement and motivation can be multiplied when it is spread to recognize those who are modeling the teamwork and cooperation that is desired within any conflict. Try to give suitable models in these instances because behavior modeling can be risky if there are elements in the model that are undesirable<sup>13</sup>.

❖ **Talk Less:**

The less you talk, the less problem you are likely to be involved in. learn to mind your business at your workplace. Act only when you are asked to do so by your superior. Do not take laws into your hands. Avoid gossip and rumour mongering. It is said that unless you hear it with your own ears and see it with your own eyes, do not imagine it in your small head and say it with your big mouth.

❖ **Avoid using coercion and intimidation:**

Emotional outbursts or coercing people may stop the problem temporarily, but do not fool yourself into thinking it is a long-term solution. Odds are the problem will resurface. At that point not only will you have the initial problem to deal with, but also the angry feelings that have festered below the surface during the interim.

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<sup>13</sup> Workplace Conflict Technique, University of Notre Dame, [www.notredameonline.com/simple-workplace-conflict-technique](http://www.notredameonline.com/simple-workplace-conflict-technique), Accessed on the 29/2/2016 at 2.06pm.

❖ **Act decisively:**

Once you have taken time to gather information, talked to all the parties involved, and reviewed all the circumstances, make your decision and act. Don't leave the issue in limbo. Taking too long to make a decision could damage your credibility and the employees' perception of you. They may view you as either too weak, too uncaring, or both, to handle the problem. Not everyone will agree with your decision, but at least they will know where you stand<sup>14</sup>.

❖ **Acknowledge the problem:**

There was an exchange between two board members. One member was frustrated with the direction the organization was taking. He told the other, "Just don't worry about it. It isn't that important." Keep in mind what appears to be a small issue to you can be a major issue with another. Acknowledging the frustration and concerns is an important step in resolving the conflict.

## CONCLUSION

The expenditure of valuable resources to address and resolve conflict, and to improve communication in the workplace, may seem to be a luxury. It is not. It is, however, an effective measure to preserve the most important resources in the workplace — happy and productive employees. An investment in educating employees in effective communication and conflict management skills is a gift that is worth having.

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<sup>14</sup> Smith G., Conflict Resolution: Steps to Manage Workplace Conflict, [www.businessknowhow.com/manage/resolveconflict/htm](http://www.businessknowhow.com/manage/resolveconflict/htm), Accessed on the 3/32016 at 12:24pm

Conflicts also help to overcome individual psychological distortions and biases by forcing people out of their traditional modes of thinking. Conflicts make us more aware of problems within our relationship that needs to be solved. Conflicts energize and increase motivation to deal with problems. Conflicts reduce the day to day irritations of relating to someone. A good argument may do a lot to resolve the small tensions of interacting with other people. Conflicts help you understand what you are like as a person, what makes you angry, what frightens you, what is important to you and how you intend to manage conflicts are all highlighted when you are in conflict with someone.

Better decisions are generally made when there is disagreement about what the decision should be amongst the people responsible for the decision. Disagreement often causes the decision to be thought through more carefully. Despite the inevitability of inter-personal conflicts, there seems to be a general feeling in human beings that conflicts are really bad and should be avoided at any cost. Yet a lack of conflict may signal apathy and non-involvement. This may even look like the scene of a graveyard silence which is not a sign of a healthy relationship.

Conflicts when skillfully managed can be of great value to you and your relationship- personal or professional. It is also very important we try to alleviate conflict related problems. On the other hand trying to manage conflict can be learning and growing experience as you both struggle with and overcome the problem. Whether verbal or non-verbal, communication can soothe tempers, settle misunderstandings, sort out problems and get the organization back to normal setting.