

Managing Conflict

Part One



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Researches stated that managers spend at least 20 percent of their time dealing with conflict.

The manner in which a manager handles and deals with a conflict situation influences and determines whether the conflict has a positive or a negative impact on the individuals or the groups involved and the organization.

Dictionaries define conflict as “A struggle to resist or overcome; contest of opposing forces or powers; strife; battle. A state or condition of opposition; antagonism; discord; a painful tension set up by a clash between opposed and contradictory impulses”.

In addition, the American Consulting Psychologist Dr. Harry Mills describes conflict as “A situation in which one person feels that another person has harmed or is about to harm something you care about. Such conflicts may involve incompatibility of goals, differences in interpretation of facts, and disagreements over expectations”.

Most people have negative associations with conflict. We tend to think of conflict in terms of anger, hostility, violence, stress, and fear. This traditional view of conflict that prevailed in the past is no longer valid and does not fit reality.

Today, conflict is seen as a natural occurrence, a natural part of life, and a normal outcome of human interaction. In other words, no matter how hard we try to avoid it, conflict enters our lives from time to time.

In the workplace, managers are continuously faced with conflict situations. These conflict situations, if unresolved, may lead to avoidance, inability to work together, verbal assaults, resentment, hostility and violent acts. They may cause a great deal of discomfort, frustration, sadness, pain and anger.

According to Dr. Harry Mills, anger is a basic human emotion that is experienced by all people. It is an unpleasant feeling that occurs when we think we have been injured, mistreated, opposed in our views, or when we are faced with obstacles that keep us from attaining personal goals.

However, before we get angry with someone, we should reflect on what Aristotle (384-322 BCE) said 2500 years ago. He said, "Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way – that is not easy".

Conflict in the workplace is inevitable, cannot be eliminated, and may be either constructive or destructive. However, many managers view conflict as something that should be avoided at all costs. Nevertheless, conflict has negative and positive results and, as long as it is resolved effectively, can be beneficial in certain circumstances and can lead to personal, professional, and organizational growth.

Positive conflict helps people understand what others feel is important and define and clarify issues and values. It can lead to a confrontation, which can bring out ideas, issues, and values in a way which clears the air. Moreover, it can bring a sense of respect to all and can be the start of defining adjusted or new goals, which are more satisfactory to everyone.

Negative conflict, however, interrupts normal relations, causes stress and results in hardships, causes possible break-up of relationships, and provokes hurtful, personally harmful effects on the self-concept of the person involved. It causes resentment and hostility, makes rational discussion difficult or impossible, and wastes people's time and energy.

The causes of conflict vary, and understanding these causes is the first step in dealing with it effectively. Among these causes are the five human characteristics that work against the meeting of minds.

In the celebrated work, "Getting through to People", Dr. Jesse S. Nirenberg stated that these five human characteristics are resistance to change, the urge to talk rather than listen, wishful hearing, unwarranted assumptions, and habitual secretiveness.

Another cause of conflict is the breach of trust between individuals. A breach of trust unleashes our strongest emotions that frequently lead to conflict.

Unresolved disagreement between individuals is another reason for conflict occurrence. According to psychologists (Skinner, Chatman, Flynn, et. al.), disagreements are normal, but when they are left unresolved, however, the associated feelings and emotions will remain in force, at least at some level. When another situation brings this disagreement back to the forefront, these suppressed emotions can erupt with force, usually far in excess of those associated with the original disagreement. Therefore, it is critically important to resolve disagreements as they occur.

A primary cause of conflict is personality and values differences. People differ in their attitude, behaviour, thought, habits, and values. No two people are ever the same. Therefore, we have different values and beliefs that guide our decisions and behavior. These natural differences, in addition to our ego, are some of the causes of conflict.

Miscommunication, giving ambiguous unclear instructions, and failure to provide feedback, are other causes of conflict. These are in addition to the individual's state of mind, stress level, and his or her mood.

People react to conflict in many ways based on their prior experience. There are people, who acknowledge a dispute but remain uninvolved; some people recognize a conflict and accept any solution; and some people ignore or deny it.

There are also people who feel that they need to agitate to get their problems heard, and some other people benefit from a conflict and agitate or maintain conflict just for the fun of it. Conflict in the workplace may be either internal (Intrapersonal) or external (Interpersonal) to the individual.

Intrapersonal conflict occurs when barriers exist between an individual's motives and the achievement of his or her goals. It also can occur when goals have both negative and positive aspects and when conflicting goals exist.

Interpersonal conflict can result from and caused by many factors. These factors including – but not limited to – opposing personalities, racial, gender, education level, marital status, experience or religious prejudice, envy and jealousy.

Conflict in the workplace may be either constructive or destructive. Negative intense conflict can be damaging. It can rapidly turn into personal dislike, may cause one or more employees to leave the organization, teamwork breaks down, and talents and efforts are wasted as people disengage from their work. Consequently, it can adversely lead to sabotage, stealing, lying, distortion of information, and other similar ethical misconduct that have a disastrous effect on the organization.

However, research indicates that conflict, when properly managed, can result in a positive impact which benefits all parties involved. It can solve many problems that it has brought to the surface, and can significantly improve resilience to stress at work.