Managing Conflict

Part Two

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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.

Among these benefits is that it improves self-awareness and the awareness of others. Conflict pushes individuals to examine themselves, learn great deal about the other people involved, understand the things that are important to them, sharpen their focus, and enhance their effectiveness.

Another benefit is that by determining the cause of a conflict and developing a solution to the conflict creates change for the better.

In addition, recognizing a conflict may open new and more effective channels of communication; thus, increases understanding. The discussion needed to resolve a conflict expands people's awareness of the situation. Then, when it is resolved effectively, it can be healthy in that it relieves emotions and feelings.

Hence, people involved can develop stronger mutual respect and trust in their ability to work together. These and other benefits consequently will improve group and organizational performance.

According to psychologist Dr. Harry Mills, Dr. Kenneth Thomas, Professor Warren Schmidt, et.al, "Defining a conflict is important because it delineates a possible set of solutions.

Emotions are also important because positive feelings increase the tendency to see possible relationships among elements of a problem and encourage taking a broader view of the situation. Negative emotions tend to result in over simplification of the issues, reduce trust and encourage negative interpretations the behavior of others".

Psychologists argued that people have preferred conflict resolution style and deal with conflict in many ways based on their prior experience and other factors. In the 1970s Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict.

In their book, "Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)", Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann stated that these five styles are:

1 - Competitive; the use of power

People who tend towards a competitive style know what they want and take a firm stand. This style is assertive, uncooperative, and a power-oriented mode. When competing, an individual pursues his or her own concerns at the other person's expense, using whatever power seems appropriate to win his or her position. Competing might mean standing up for your rights, defending a position you believe is correct, or simply trying to win. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be make fast, when the decision is unpopular, or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly.

2- Accommodating; Giving in and giving all

This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. It is unassertive and cooperative - the opposite of competing.

When accommodating, an individual neglects his or her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning, or when you want to be in a position to collect on this "favor" you gave. However people may not return favors, and overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

3 - Avoiding; attempting to get rid of conflict by denying it exists

People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is unassertive and uncooperative. When avoiding, an individual does not immediately

pursue either his or her own concerns or those of the other person. He or she does not address the conflict.

Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem.

4 - Collaborative; groups bring up all relevant information and solve problems together

Collaborating is both assertive and cooperative - the opposite of avoiding. When collaborating, an individual attempts to work with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both. It involves digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative that meets both sets of concerns. Collaborating between two people might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, with the goal of resolving some condition that would otherwise have them competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

This style is useful when a person needs to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution, when there have been previous conflicts in the group, or when the situation is too important for a simple exchange.

5 - Compromising; Bargaining; meeting each other half way

Compromising is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. When compromising, the objective is to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. Compromising falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating, giving up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but doesn't explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground.
[*Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), Kenneth Wayne Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, Consulting Psychologists Press Inc., 2001*]