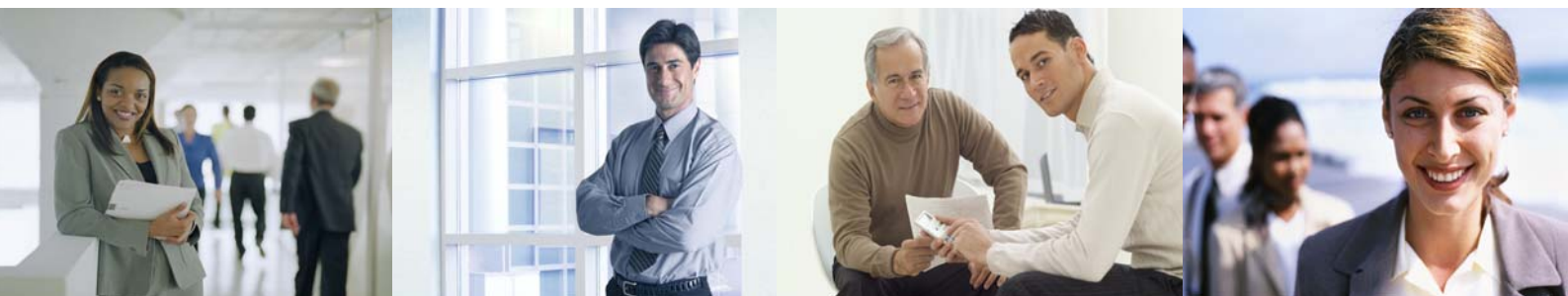


Managing Conflict in the Workplace



What do we mean by conflict in the workplace?

Conflict happens when personalities clash, when team members perceive interference from one another, when employees feel unable to progress due to another's actions. Conflict involves an ongoing situation, unlike a dispute, which is a one-off incident. If a dispute goes unresolved, it can cause a conflict situation. This state of affairs, if left unresolved, can escalate quickly and create a potentially dangerous workplace situation.

From Dispute to Discomfort, from Conflict to Crisis

Initially a dispute between one or more employees, without resolution, may cause an uncomfortable working environment, characterised by gossip and rumour, an awkward atmosphere and non-cooperation between team members. This in turn can lead to further dispute in the form of arguments and complaints. At this point others may become involved and take sides. Incidents escalate and tension rises. This is now a conflict situation. The passing of blame becomes a formal complaint; employees are increasingly non-productive as all their energy is directed towards the conflict.

Without management intervention the conflict can readily approach crisis point. There may be strong clashes, highly emotional outbursts, shock resignations, verbal abuse, even threats of physical violence. At this point the only option is to ponder...how was this situation allowed to get so out of hand?

So how do we prevent a crisis situation from happening in the first place?

Dispute Resolution

Managers must get involved as early as possible and attempt to diffuse and resolve the dispute to the satisfaction of both parties. Initially managers need to bring both parties together and discuss the situation. A possible dispute resolution process could be:

Step 1: Bring both parties together

It is essential that both parties perceive this to be in a neutral place.

Step 2: Lay down ground rules

Explain that they must not interrupt each other; each party will get a chance to state their opinion.

Encourage parties to speak in the first person - this removes blame by getting an individual to focus on their reaction rather than the others action towards them. E.g. instead of "John really makes me mad when he leaves early", "I feel angry when I see John leave early".

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Step 3: Identify the problem/issues

Give each party a chance to outline the incident/issues they have from their point of view. List the issues that must be resolved. If it was a one off incident, what was the underlying cause? Prioritise the list according to urgency.

Step 4: Understanding Both Sides

Using the list get each person to explain how he or she feels about each issue/or the incident Get both sides talking and listening to each other - encouraging both sides to put forward their points of view, but emphasise the discussion of their feelings in regard to the matter. Encourage both sides to understand each other's point of view. In the case of irresolvable issues, get both parties to agree to disagree.

Step 5: Move forward

Find a resolution for each issue - how does behavior need to be modified by either or both parties in the future to prevent a recurrence of dispute? Get both parties to acknowledge the problem/issues, and agree to move forward. Give both parties a written transcript of the meeting, and ask them to sign a commitment to future awareness of the problem/issues.

Step 6: Review

Review the situation 3 months later. Are the issues resolved? If not do you need a further mediation meeting? Would counselling be appropriate?

Conflict Resolution

If possible direct negotiation between conflicting parties with a manager as mediator is the best, most direct way to handle the situation. However once progressed to a conflict stage involving high emotions and the complete breakdown of communication between one or more parties it may be necessary to bring in a higher level manager as arbitrator.

Using a similar stepped process as outlined for dispute resolution, the arbitrator can conduct conflict resolution meetings with individual parties and negotiate between the two sides. Both sides must agree to abide by the managers objective ruling decision/recommendations, and it is wise to have a further appeals process in place for employees who remain dissatisfied with the outcome.

When emotions are involved it can be difficult to communicate with parties in this kind of resolution discussion. These are some points to consider about handling difficult behavior in such a situation:

How to handle high emotions

Be calm and supportive

Allow the person time to compose themselves, if necessary give them a cool down period in a safe environment

Does the person prefer to speak in private?

Bring in a counsellor if necessary.



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How to handle anger

Be patient

Prevent the anger from being focused on the other party

Stay calm and in control – your calmness will help diffuse their anger

Request respect and cooperation

End the meeting if necessary, or pause it and get the angry person to go somewhere 'safe' to cool off

How to handle the silent treatment

Encourage discussion by using open-ended questions

Allow them to be silent for a while if necessary, be patient

Rephrase difficult questions

Does the person prefer to speak in private? If needs be, use an external arbitrator or bring in a counsellor

How to handle the gossips

Keep questions closed

Remind the person that you only need to know facts and their own feelings

Get them to acknowledge whether they are describing assumed versus evidenced behavior

Keep an open mind and get corroboration if needed

How to handle the non-stop talkers

Keep questions closed

Control the flow, interrupt kindly but firmly

Ask them to sum up feelings using keywords

Get them to list issues in bullet point

Set a time for them to talk more about the issue at a later date, or set up a session with a counsellor

How to handle interruptions

Use non-verbal statements such as facial expression

Request cooperation and respect

Remind the person interrupting that they will get their chance to speak

If they constantly interrupt, consider communicating with each party separately

How to handle abuse or threatening behaviour

Immediately request the behaviour stops and explain why it is unacceptable

Pause or end the meeting

Remove the person/s to a safe environment and allow them to cool down

Have the person removed from site if necessary, using security officers or equivalent.

When a situation has progressed to crisis stage

In this scenario, the only option is to manage the crisis situation as best as you can in the circumstances. The aim of crisis management is to return the work environment to some semblance of normality, calm tempers and prevent violent or unacceptable acts of behavior from occurring.



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Typical Crisis Management Strategy

Intervene

Ensure all are aware that management is now dealing with this situation. The primary aim is to restore order and a safe working environment.

Take control of the situation

Separate conflicting parties

Remove any person engaged in unacceptable behavior

Use external support if there is the threat of real violence or danger

Calmly reassure remaining employees on the scene

Discussion and Resolution

After a decent cooling off period, follow the steps of dispute/conflict resolution if possible. If necessary use external support, counsellors or internal HR specialists.

Debrief and review

Acknowledge situation has occurred and resolved to all parties involved, either directly or indirectly, within your organisation.

Set a review agenda and follow up.

Prevention is better than cure!

Whilst it is nearly impossible to prevent all disputes in the workplace, there are some strategies that can be considered in order to minimise conflict in the workplace and the resulting impact on production and performance. For example:

- Review dispute/conflict resolution policies and update or create.
- Staff 'conflict resolution' training including role playing exercises
- Use 360° team performance appraisal to assess team coherence.
- Encourage open discussion and forums to raise issues of potential conflict.
- Team building days or activities can help form bonds and break down barriers.

Personalities will always clash, bad tempers flare up, and disputes arise over the tiniest thing. However with strong management policies and clear resolution processes in place, conflict can be avoided and crises canned.

