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Turn a negative into a positive by properly managing conflict

By Janet Reese

What is the first word that comes to your mind when you think of “conflict”? Fight, anger, avoid, bad, wrongdoing? If you associate any of these words with conflict, you are not alone. “Conflict is almost universally perceived as a negative occurrence, a blemish on what most people expect should be the smooth operation of a well-ordered life,” says conflict expert and author Dudley Weeks, Ph.D.

Most people spend a third of their time at the workplace, a common ground for conflict. From minor nuances such as two employees irritated by each other’s noise in a shared cubicle, to more serious cases involving sexual harassment and discrimination, conflict is as much a part of the workplace as is the work itself.

Conflict is inevitable when people with different personalities and goals work together. But negative views of conflict often obstruct one’s ability to effectively resolve differences in the workplace. Many people either try to ignore conflict and hope it goes away, or mishandle it, which often makes it worse. Unresolved conflict doesn’t go away, but when conflict is confronted early and gently, a resolution is likely.

The cost of conflict in the workplace cannot be ignored. Resolutionworks, a U.S. conflict management training company, recently reported that Fortune 500 executives spend about a fifth of their time on litigation-related matters relating to workplace conflict. Companies usually pay thousands of dollars in lawyer’s fees even when they win, let alone lose. Other costs associated with conflict include lost work time, reduced productivity, low morale, employee turnover, emotional pain and health costs related to stress.

Conflict is never easy to deal with, and even less so during uncertain times. Layoffs, economic and global security issues, increased workloads and personal stress are contributing to the rise of workplace conflict, experts say. Realizing that workplace conflict can be expensive and time-consuming, companies increasingly are seeking ways to manage their conflicts more closely and effectively.

Liz Loescher, executive director of The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit organization that teaches conflict management skills, believes that one of the first steps in becoming more effective at resolving conflicts is to transform how we think about conflict. “Conflict is neither positive nor negative, but a potentially creative force and an opportunity for mutual growth,” she says. “When conflicts are dealt with effectively, they can increase understanding among coworkers, reduce workplace tension, improve communication and

enhance teamwork. Little by little, we need to create problem-solving workplace environments rather than 'gotcha' environments.”

How can workplaces create problem-solving environments that deal with conflict effectively? Many companies turn to training seminars, where employees learn communication and conflict management techniques. The Conflict Center teaches employees “The Art of Gentle Confrontation” which involves communication skills such as speaking your truth, listening to your difficult person’s truth, asking questions that genuinely help you understand, and keeping your tone of voice low and your pace slow.

While skills-based workshops cover many important themes and are useful in addressing workplace conflict, ultimately the results can be disappointing, say dispute resolution experts Michael Saks and Andy Lewis in their Nov. 26, 2001 *Financial Times* article. They observe, “The problem is that conflicts are embedded in organizational systems that limit the effectiveness of these skills. In other words, people cannot use effective conflict management skills if there is no integrated system in place to support such efforts.”

Saks and Lewis suggest a well-planned and integrated conflict management system to overcome the challenges that organizations create for workplace conflict resolution. Loescher has implemented a simple conflict management/resolution procedure for employees at The Conflict Center. Five steps outline the expected employee protocol for conflict resolution, from trying to resolve the conflict with whom the employee has the conflict, to getting assistance from an outside mediator or facilitator.

While this five-step procedure works well for the The Conflict Center’s 14 employees, a more involved system may be needed for conflict resolution in larger organizations. Golden, Colorado-based Coors recently instituted an extensive conflict resolution system called “Coors Resolve” for its 6,000 employees. The system includes four components: 1) early workplace resolution including conflict management training; 2) an “ombudsperson” – a neutral and confidential source for conflict resolution; 3) internal options – mediation, a formal complaint process, and an appeal board; and, 4) external options – mediation and arbitration. Coors Resolve is designed to give employees more conflict resolution options than previously offered.

“When people have a number of options, they are more likely to feel empowered and engaged in resolving conflicts,” says ombudsperson Carolyn Noorbakhsh who administers the program. “Our focus is on resolving conflicts at the lowest level and helping people approach conflict positively.”

When designing a conflict management program for the workplace, The Conflict Center advises:

- **Be direct** – Keep the process simple so that problems can be resolved at the lowest possible level.
- **Be positive** – Offer constructive tools that will solve the problem and build relationships.
- **Be efficient** – Deal with conflicts quickly, don't let them fester. Offer a quick and direct process.
- **Be confidential** – Make sure to respect the privacy of all parties involved.
- **Be fair** – Provide avenues for handling problems objectively and ensure that all perspectives are heard. Use an independent mediator or neutral third party, if needed.

Managed well, conflict can be a great resource for both employee and company. A well-planned and integrated conflict management system can help to create a workplace culture that supports conflict resolution.

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