

LEADERSHIP

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Resolving Conflict Rationally and Effectively

In many cases, conflict in the workplace just seems to be a fact of life. We've all seen situations where different people with different goals and needs have come into conflict. And we've all seen the often-intense personal animosity that can result. The fact that conflict exists, however, is not necessarily a bad thing: As long as it is resolved effectively, it can lead to personal and professional growth. In many cases, effective conflict resolution can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes.

The good news is that by resolving conflict successfully, you can solve many of the problems that it has brought to the surface, as well as getting benefits that you might not at first expect:

Increased understanding:

The discussion needed to resolve conflict expands people's awareness of the situation, giving them an insight into how they can achieve their own goals without undermining those of other people.

Increased group cohesion:

When conflict is resolved effectively, team members can develop stronger mutual respect, and a renewed faith in their ability to work together.

Improved self-knowledge:

Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals in close detail, helping them understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness.

However, if conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be damaging. Conflicting goals can quickly turn into personal dislike. Teamwork breaks down. Talent is wasted as people disengage from their work. And it's easy to end up in a vicious downward spiral of negativity and recrimination.

If you're to keep your team or organization working effectively, you need to stop this downward spiral as soon as you can. To do this, it helps to understand two of the theories that lie behind effective conflict resolution.

"Conflict is an opportunity that no manager or colleague should squander. Conflict is the impetus for all change. The positivity of that change is entirely dependent upon you..."

- Joel Ashby, M.A.



Traversing organizational conflict

Understanding the Theory: Conflict Styles

In the 1970s Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They argued that people typically have a preferred conflict resolution style. However they also noted that different styles were most useful in different situations.

They developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which helps you to identify which style you tend towards when conflict arises.

Competitive:

People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast; when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.

Collaborative:

People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need 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 trade-off.



Compromising:

People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, and the compromiser him- or herself also expects to relinquish something. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming.

Conflict is not only inevitable, it's essential.

Training yourself to see conflict as an opportunity for growth instead of a consequence or a failure is essential. Remember, conflict is a prime motivator for real and lasting change. Always avoid the paradigm of winning versus losing. If managed properly, no one loses in a conflict. As a leader, it is your responsibility to effectively manage conflict in your workplace.



The Thomas-Kilmann Model

Accommodating:

This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is highly cooperative. 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.

Avoiding:

People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. 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. However in many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take.

Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you're in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary.



Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships.

Understanding The Theory: The "Interest-Based Relational Approach"

The second theory is commonly referred to as the "Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach". This type of conflict resolution respects individual differences while helping people avoid becoming too entrenched in a fixed position.

Make sure that good relationships are the first priority: As far as possible, make sure that you treat the other calmly and that you try to build mutual respect. Do your best to be courteous to one-another and remain constructive under pressure.

Keep people and problems separate: Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflictive positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.

Pay attention to the interests that are being presented: By listening carefully you'll most-likely understand why the person is adopting his or her position.

Listen first; talk second: To solve a problem effectively you have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending your own position.

Set out the "Facts": Agree and establish the objective, observable elements that will have an impact on the decision.

Explore options together: Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you can get to this idea jointly.



Interest-Based Relational Approach

By following these rules, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so-often causes conflict to spin out of control.

Our corporate strategies should not be developed to avoid conflict, but should rather have much thought given to managing conflict.



A well run company is not devoid of conflict

Using the Tool: A Conflict Resolution Process

Based on these approaches, a starting point for dealing with conflict is to identify the overriding conflict style employed by yourself, your team or your organization.

Over time, people's conflict management styles tend to mesh, and a "right" way to solve conflict emerges. It's good to recognize when this style can be used effectively, however make sure that people understand that different styles may suit different situations.

Look at the circumstances, and think about the style that may be appropriate.

Step One: Set the Scene:

If appropriate to the situation, agree the rules of the IBR Approach (or at least consider using the approach yourself.) Make sure that people understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression.

If you are involved in the conflict, emphasize the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Use active listening skills to ensure you hear and understand other's positions and perceptions.

Step Two: Gather Information

Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect his or her opinion and need his or her cooperation to solve the problem.

Try to understand his or her motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these.

Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms: Is it affecting work performance? Damaging the delivery to the client? Disrupting team work? Hampering decision-making? or so on. Be sure to focus on work issues and leave personalities out of the discussion.

Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view. Identify issues clearly and concisely. Use "I" statements. Remain flexible. Clarify feelings.

Step Three: Seek Consensus

Agree on the Problem. This sounds like an obvious step, but often different underlying needs, interests and goals can cause people to perceive problems very differently. You'll need to agree the problems that you are trying to solve before you'll find a mutually acceptable solution.

Sometimes different people will see different but interlocking problems – if you can't reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very least, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

Step Four: Feedback

Brainstorm Possible Solutions If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never considered before.

Step Five: Negotiations

Negotiate a Solution By this stage, the conflict may be resolved: Both sides may better understand the position of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all.

However you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone.

There are three guiding principles here: **Be Calm, Be Patient, Have Respect**.

Restate.

Paraphrase.

Summarize.

And make sure that when you talk, you're using an adult, assertive approach rather than a submissive or aggressive style.



Remember:

Conflict is pervasive and will be present from time to time in any workplace environment. It is when we are concerned with the evolution of our workplace that conflict analysis and resolution tactics come to the forefront.

How do you want your office or organization to respond to these opportunities for growth? (because that's really what conflict is)

"Whenever two good people argue over principles, they are both right."

-Marie Von Ebner-Eschenbach



It's your people, not your technology that drive performance.

It's important to understand that in many instances, both parties involved in a conflict at the workplace are seeking the same goal. We take up positions in order to secure our interests. Many times it takes the collaborative and synergistic qualities of conflict resolution to show us an alternative position that will still secure those interests. Its is our positions that are typically in conflict with one another, funny enough, our interests are typically aligned.

Not all conflicts require the same prescription. It takes careful consideration of the nature of the conflict, the setting as well as the participants. Last but not least, it requires you knowing where you align yourself in the continuum on the previous page.

"What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing..." - C.S. Lewis

Whether we like it or not, our corporate climate; which is an internal phenomena, is directly proportional to how our organizations are viewed by the public, as well as other organizations. This climate will dictate how your organization is addressed, and how it is thought of. In essence, your reputation is at stake here. What you do is important, but how you do it is even more important.

There are no tools at your disposal which can affect this climate more dramatically than conflict resolution.

So what kind of company do you want to work for, or work with?

About the author

Upon completion of his Master's Degree in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, Joel has spent years consulting with domestic and foreign government interests as well as labor and production industry leaders and has helped usher in a new way of doing business in those industries. A business model based upon a focus on people rather than profits or profitability. Through his research, Joel has found that it is people who drive innovation, and people who drive profitability. *"When we concern ourselves with the advancement and edification of our employees, our capacity for organizational effectiveness raises proportionally."*

Ethical leadership is a passion of Joel's and equipping men and women with tools to be tomorrow's leaders is what he's all about.

"Effective leadership is a pursuit, not a destination"

For a tailored approach to your specific needs regarding where your organization is with regard to where you would like to be, please reference the contact section.

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