Avoid Employee Workplace Conflict Before You Need To Resolve It.

By, Mr Shea Heaver | Regional Director | U.S. & Canada

Employee conflicts in the workplace are a common and destructive occurrence yet they are not caused by differing opinions but by how those differences are managed. Conflict is a major source of organizational inefficiency and wasted opportunities.

While some conflict is inevitable, in most cases it can be easily avoided because it arises out of disparate views and ideas that could very easily be contained and resolved up front.

In an environment where discord and disagreement isn't actively addressed by all team members the resulting conflicts will:

- Be detrimental to morale
- Increase absenteeism
- Lead to higher staff turnover
- Dramatically reduce productivity
- Consume upwards of 25% of managers time
- Negatively impact the organizations bottom line

How employee conflict starts...

Unfortunately there will always be individuals whose personal ambition, agenda or mannerisms will strain workplace relationships, but usually those people are eventually weeded out. However, most workplace conflict arises when one party challenges or criticizes another who in turn responds by trying to justify and explain their actions.

In the majority of case (though not all) it is the responder who actually initiates the conflict and it is they who should instead think about why the person came to them in the first place. *They are trying to satisfy their own needs and means at the expense of others.* Rather than calmly taking on board what the other person is saying, human nature kicks in and the tendency to interrupt, exaggerate, justify, blame, accuse and get defensive or aggressive takes over.

You can't shake hands with a clenched fist...

The initial response when someone challenges something we've done or an idea we have all too often begins with phrases such as

- "Yeah, but..." – Justifying
- "You/He/She always..." – Accusation
- "That's not..." – Defensive
- "It wasn't me who..." – Blame

This immediately breaks any rapport, understanding and empathy between the parties and the first steps on the path towards conflict have now been taken. At this time polarizing opinions have surfaced and both parties are likely going to find it difficult to arrive at a collaborative, win-win situation – even if both subconsciously want it.

From this point forward the conflict may escalate into a war of words between colleagues, a supervisor-subordinate grievance or worse. If possible try to diffuse the situation at this point – whether that means taking the high road (even temporarily) or just asking can it be taken back up at a later time.

A much better approach is to first establish, understand and tend to the request or need of the person initiating the conversation.

Conflict isn't the only outcome...

It's naive and lazy to simple blame employee conflict on differences. Indeed, alternate viewpoints can become complimentary to each other and facilitate a common synergy between individuals and across teams.

In most cases it is simply a judgmental, disparaging and negative mindset coupled with some poorly chosen words that turn varying opinions into discord, dispute and conflict.

> "Strength lies in differences, not in similarities"
>
> Stephen R. Covey

Connect with the initiator...

To create a feeling of trust and get things off on the right foot, it is imperative to first understand why the person approached you and what their needs are. They may have a very legitimate reason but perhaps worded it in a manner that you weren't ready for. You need to detach the issue from the person who or manner in which it was brought it up.

Replay the question in your head quickly, take a deep breath and then ask for clarity on why it was asked. A very simple *"Why do you think..."* or *"How would you..."* immediately lets the other party know you are interested in getting to a win-win situation.

You are inviting the other person to explain their situation or needs and initiated the solution process….and that is a critical first step. You may still have differing opinions (a good thing) but at least you have set the tone that you are receptive to feedback and want to make things better for everyone.

Don't jump in with a solution...

It is imperative not to immediately jump in with a solution when a conflict situation arises. Although you may think you have an immediate way forward, it usually stems from a unique point of view and may not match that of the requester.

By asking what ideas or suggestions the other person has you immediately shift their focus from the problem they came with to finding the solution together.

Instead of focusing on the past, asking the "'what…" question has enabled you both to now concentrate on the future.

This subtle swing has now turned conflict into an opportunity to move forward in a way that meets both sets of needs. We are now in a win-win frame of mind.

Tips

Tips for a conflict free workplace...

☑ Take a deep breath before responding
☑ Connect with the other person before expressing your opinions
☑ Validate their point of view and intentions

☑ Separate the issue from the individual
☑ Invite a solution before putting forth your own
☑ Look for common ideas and build on it together

Conclusion

Conflict occurs when individual employees or teams satisfy their own needs at the expense of others... and frequently this happens without the offending party even realizing it.

Addressing the characteristics and behaviors that lead to conflict through ongoing team-based activities will lead to a greater understanding of first realizing what is being challenged or requested. From there, individuals and teams can then take proactive steps to work collaboratively on a solution.

You will have therefore turned potential conflict into progressive potential.

Drawing on his years of experience in the global IT field, Shea has become a passionate promoter of combining a people-centric business culture with shrewd project management practices to improve organizational performance. Focus is made on helping organizations achieve higher levels of Employee Engagement, increased Job Satisfaction and better Workplace Relationships.

Having worked in the US, Canada, Europe, Asia and other global locations, Shea increasingly realized that individuals who feel valued while working within structured principles, lead to teams that are motivated, innovative and highly productive.

Shea is Regional Director U.S. & Canada for McConnon International Ltd.

Author : Shea Heaver
shea@mcconnonint.com