

Conflict Engagement for Leaders

By Cinnie Noble

Jonah and Marta have worked together for two years. Almost from the beginning they didn't get along. Recently they argued openly over their project responsibilities. Claire, their manager intervened; however, she thought her talk with them was ineffective. Claire hadn't been trained in conflict management, thought something more was needed, and decided to ask HR if they could mediate the situation.

Karl and Manny were co-workers for three years, with a history of conflict. Now Karl is Manny's manager and their conflict has been escalating. Other staff members are aware of the dissension. Karl is very concerned, and wonders about how to better manage with Manny and what his options may be.

One of the things Sophia hates most about her role as a manager is delivering difficult messages. In a few weeks she will be conducting performance reviews and is concerned about conflict that could arise with certain combative staff members. Sophia is not sure who can help her with this.

These types of scenarios are rampant and represent only a small sample of the daily interpersonal conflicts or disputes that happen in the workplace.

Leaders understand the impact conflict has on the morale and productivity of staff. They want their people to engage in effective conflict management practices, have the challenging conversations, and handle their differences independently. Yet, managers often lack sufficient skills to find their way through their own conflict-laden situations, let alone provide guidance as a role model for their direct reports.

Outcomes and Costs of Improperly Managed Conflict

The following list includes a number of outcomes of improperly managed interpersonal workplace conflict seen in organizations today.

- Low morale, motivation and energy; loss of interest in one's work and job dissatisfaction
- Stress-related illness, including loss of sleep and clinical depression
- Weakened and lost relationships, especially disruptive for interdependent team members with tight deadlines
- Strong emotions such as: humiliation, anger, frustration, hopelessness, hurt feelings, resentment, disappointment, and contempt
- Loss of confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging
- Loss of team and organizational purpose
- Loss of trust in and respect for those in positions of power
- Spillover into personal lives, such as increased arguments with family and friends

What about impact on the bottom line? There are quantifiable costs of poorly managed interpersonal conflict for any organization: decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and the related expenses due to disability and medical/stress leave, attrition, litigation and grievances.

Lawsuits, grievances and hard costs associated with discrimination, harassment, bullying, mobbing, abuse of authority, property damage, violence, etc. are some of the worst case scenarios. Although sometimes overlooked, poor conflict management practices will damage the organization's reputation and credibility as a business partner and place to work.

Do the Math

For a very simple calculation of the cost of conflict, multiply the number of hours spent by leaders addressing even just one interpersonal dispute in any given week, by their hourly wage.

Add in the hours spent by those caught in the wake of the dispute. E.g. time spent discussing the issues with the disputants, coworkers, managers and union representative when

applicable; not to mention HR's time. Very quickly the business case emerges about the importance of having processes in place to build conflict competence and help people effectively engage in conflict.

Conflict as an Opportunity

Most organizations are reactive when it comes to conflict; they wait for a problem to occur. Leading organizations take a proactive approach. They help leaders and staff gain competence to address their differences and engage constructively in conflict. They position conflict as an opportunity to build relationships, share diverse ideas and opinions, and create mutually satisfying solutions, rather than frame conflict as a problem to avoid at all costs.

To make a paradigm shift to see conflict as "gain" vs "pain," it is necessary for organizations to value conflict management skills as a core competency for leaders and staff. This usually means providing support with the requisite training and coaching.

For leaders, competency building could include:

- Developing coaching skills
- Facilitating conversations between and among disputing staff members
- Role modeling effective engagement with their own conflicts
- Introducing and addressing challenging issues
- Delivering clear and concrete feedback in supportive ways and responding appropriately to other conflict-saturated situations
- Handling tough performance conversations and related appraisals
- Providing a range of easily accessible conflict management options for staff, e.g., mediation, peer coaching, ombudsman service and other methods of doing so.

Conflict Management Coaching

Conflict management coaching (also known as conflict coaching), is a specialty in which a trained coach helps people on a one-on-one basis to gain competence to independently

manage and resolve an ongoing dispute, to address anticipated conflicts and/or generally, to improve their conflict competence. One of the many useful aspects of this process is that it assists people to not only resolve their own disputes, it also helps them gain sustainable skills to manage and engage in future ones with increased skill.

Coaching is regularly used to prepare managers to deliver performance reviews and engage effectively in other challenging conversations. Conflict management coaching is the most proactive mechanism described in this article.

Leaders, HR professionals and others are increasingly being trained as internal coaches and peer coaches. External coaches are also retained for this purpose.

Mediation

Mediation is a process in which a trained mediator facilitates a dialogue with two or more employees in dispute. The focus is on their specific and disparate differences and the breakdown of the relationships. Leaders can be trained to conduct mediations. Alternatively, peer mediation may also be instituted or external mediators retained.

Conflict Management Training

Conflict management training and workshops on engaging in challenging conversations are becoming increasingly popular. It is suggested however, that such programs are most effective when they offer follow-up coaching. Adding post-workshop coaching to training reaps benefits that helps participants apply the learning with individualized practical and concrete assistance when they encounter conflictual situations.

What Causes Workplace Conflict?

There are many reasons that lead to interpersonal conflict and all of them provide opportunities for learning, creativity, innovation and growth for staff members and the organization itself. The following three categories indicate the common sources of conflict for leaders and staff members.

Structural Conflict

Organizational structure, rules and regulations, pay levels, benefit and vacation policies, physical space and offices, recruitment, retention and performance management practices are examples of structural variables that can lead to conflict.

Addressing structural issues are limited for most employees, and they experience a sense of powerlessness about the systems in place. In unionized workplaces, collective agreements attempt to address many of the issues, with conflicts connected to efforts made to enforce inequities.

Functional Conflict

Roles and responsibilities, task assignments, deadlines, levels of autonomy and decision making processes, methods of delegating and holding people accountable for results, and opportunities for career advancement. These are examples of functional variables that can lead to conflict.

These conflicts are most often between the employee and their manager, and are due in part, to poor leadership skills and sometimes to structural issues. Union disputes are typically based in functional conflict. In many cases the employee is seeking a better way to communicate their concerns and get their manager to understand their situation so a better solution can be found. Leaders needing help commonly seek a forum for examining their decisions and considering their options, while gaining assistance to better manage disgruntled staff.

Relationship Conflict

Clashes due to differences in personality, style, culture, values, work ethic, race, gender, religion, age, etc. are the variables that propel relationship conflicts. These conflicts typically arise from different ways of interacting and communicating. Different experiences and expectations about what constitutes fair and respectful treatment of one another is frequently at the heart of the matter.

Relationship conflicts may be between any two people (co-workers, boss/employee, customer,

supplier). The objective for resolving a relationship conflict may be to break a logjam, to make amends, to prevent unnecessary conflict, to manage an existing conflictual situation, or to prepare for a dialogue or alternative dispute resolution process, like mediation.

Summary

Interpersonal disputes may be due to structural, functional or relational problems that are inadvertently allowed to tear apart the workplace. Compounded by organizational cultures that avoid conflict and react only when things escalate, conflicts may also be due to leaders who lack conflict competence and do not have appropriate training, coaching or support to effectively manage conflict.

To create a "conflict-positive" workplace, we suggest that a systemic approach is needed. One that encourages conflict engagement and capability building. This will reduce the detrimental outcomes of ill-managed conflict on both the bottom line and people.

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