

## Understanding Conflict

Conflict is an inevitable fact of life. It is borne out of differences and will arise in any situation where people are required to interact with one another. Conflict is generally regarded as an impediment to progress. However it is not always a bad thing and can be a creative force for an organisation when managed effectively.

Surprisingly, conflict can assist in making changes. However, left unresolved, conflict can result in feelings of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, depression, stress and hopelessness. These feelings can manifest themselves in behaviours such as aggression, violence, emotional withdrawal, breakdown in communications and personal relations and result in job resignation.

### Common sources of conflict

A number of factors act independently or in combination to cause conflict. It can develop from a difference in perceptions, values or goals in areas where people are concerned about outcomes. Some of the most common sources of workplace conflict are:

- **Unclear definition of responsibility**  
For example, uncertainty over who is responsible for specific duties or who has the authority to manage these duties. Parties may claim or reject the responsibility, which can cause conflict.
- **Competition for resources**  
Time, money, space, materials, equipment and supplies are all valuable (but finite) resources. Competition for resources will inevitably lead to conflict between individuals, teams, departments or organisations.
- **Conflict in interests**  
There are two types of conflict in interests. The first is that people may only focus on their individual, personal goals and lose sight of the organisation's goals.  
The second conflict in interests is interdependency, where people rely on others to perform their own jobs effectively. The ability to accomplish their goals and objectives depends on the cooperation of others, which increases the opportunity for conflict when others fail to cooperate.

### Types of conflict

Conflict arises out of interaction between two or more people. Workplace conflict can be broken down into two types: substantive conflict and personality conflict.

#### 1. Substantive conflict

Substantive conflict is conflict about decisions, ideas, directions and actions – disagreements about the substance of issues. This type of conflict can be dealt with by addressing the specific problem, i.e. the subject of the conflict. When handled properly, substantive conflict can create something positive for the organisation. For example, a manager and one member of the team are in conflict over working hours. The team member has parental responsibilities and wishes to begin work at 9.30am. However, their manager wants all team members to begin work at 8.00am as this is when their office opens to the public. As a result, the team member persistently arrives late.

Rather than letting the situation escalate out of hand, the manager and the team member approach the situation with a view to solving a problem. They discuss the situation, which gives each a better understanding of the other person's needs. During this discussion they discover that hardly any customers call the office as early as 8.00am and the few customers that do can easily be dealt with by the other staff in the office. They also realise that most customers call between 4.00pm and 5.00pm. As a result, working hours are modified which means the team member is satisfied and provides a better service to customers.

This win/win situation would never have happened if there had not been conflict to start with, or if each party had approached the situation with the view to getting a win over the other.

#### 2. Personality conflict

Personality conflict is emotional and is usually driven by feelings of anger or frustration and perceptions about the other party's character, motives, values and personality.

This type of conflict must be addressed before it gets out of control. However, problem solving and mediation are not the best ways to manage this kind of conflict, because it is emotional and not issue based. Personality conflicts can be

emotionally charged and generally don't disappear, as people's personalities are not likely to change. When faced with this situation, it is important to establish reasonable ground rules to minimise the conflict, such as the following:

- If one employee criticises another, they must also give suggestions for improving the situation.
- No one may make personal attacks on another person.
- Grievances must be brought to the attention of the team leader.
- Personality clashes must not be allowed to hinder work.
- Employees will only be rewarded for helping and cooperating with others, not for succeeding at the expense of others.

In some situations it may be enough to tell all parties concerned that they must manage their differences in order to work together or both must leave. Personality based conflicts almost always get worse over time if they are not converted into substantive conflict, which can be more easily managed.

The key to managing conflict is communication. Understanding how to communicate effectively and encouraging employees to interact appropriately with each other can lead to a more productive workforce and a happier workplace.

Unresolved conflict can cost organisations dear in terms of employee turnover, increased absenteeism, health and stress-related compensation claims. It can also impede an organisation's progress and productivity as employees spend more time worrying about conflict than organisational objectives.

Using valuable resources to address and resolve conflict is essential for any organisation. Investing in communications and conflict resolution training is an important measure for retaining happy and productive employees.

## **Related Items**

### **Related Resources**

- [How to Mediate](#)
- [Tips for Handling Difficult People](#)
- [Analysing Conflict Styles](#)