



CREATING A CONFLICT-MANAGEMENT PLAN

BY EDWARD D. MILLER

No one likes conflict in the workplace; most of us will go out of our way to avoid it. But here's the paradox: Conflict is as essential as it is inevitable.

Unchecked and unmanaged, conflict can be negative and corrosive. But when the competition of ideas is suppressed, conformity stifles creativity. The challenge is to reduce the corrosion while stimulating the creativity.

Conflict has many sources:

- *Disputes* about inequities, broken promises, preferential treatment
- *Competition* for diminishing resources
- *Fault lines* of age, gender, race, craft, status, authority
- *Expectations*, especially when they are unclear or unmet

Fear sustains conflict, often the fear of failure. Employees who lack the competence or confidence to take on a challenging assignment will resist in order to avoid potential failure. Newly appointed managers with high potential but limited management experience will often precipitate conflict as a way of diverting attention from their own deficiencies.

Resolving conflict is seldom easy, but the failure to confront it is often more damaging than the conflict itself. The problem will persist, and the reluctant leader will be seen as timid or inept. This also holds true when we send the problem up the ladder of authority. Not only do we clog the ladder, we miss opportunities to learn how to manage effectively.

Every workplace should have a "conflict-management plan," a prescribed and widely understood method for dealing with conflict. Most don't; they depend on the experience and intuition of individual leaders. In the absence of a plan, here are some ideas that will help managers resolve conflict:

Stop Blaming. Pinpointing

responsibility for past actions can lead to learning, but doing so can easily cross the boundary to blame, where accepting responsibility becomes difficult. Marilyn Paul, writing in *The Systems Thinker* V8N1 (February 1997), reminds us, "Blaming leads to fear, which increases cover-ups and reduces the flow of information by stopping productive conversation."

Manage Your Emotions and Ego. In *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles into Opportunities* (John Wiley & Sons, 1999), Paul Stoltz suggests that the emotional "noise" of conflict interferes with its resolution:

"Filter out the internal static caused by anger and worry. These emotions cloud your judgment. Detach, in the Buddhist way. Acknowledge the emotion; it was appropriate for a few moments, so don't fight it. But you need to put it away 'on the shelf.' You can still see it, but you control it rather than having it control you. Focus on the things that can really help you."

When you're steamed, conflict resolution tends to be more conflict than resolution. Turn the "noise" down as you try to hear what's really going on.

And don't let your ego get in the way. Bosses hate to admit when they're not skilled at something; they think they look weak and ineffective. In coping with conflict, however, admitting a difficulty may be the smartest strategy, a sign of perceptive self-evaluation and, ironically, authentic confidence.

Deal with the Impact, not the Intentions. You may think you know why someone did something you didn't like, but you may be wrong, so don't attribute motives. Instead, deal with the impact and consequences of the actions.

Focus on Interests, not Staked-Out Positions. People in conflict will come to you declaring their positions ("I was only exercising my authority as

team leader") or ("She doesn't know what she's doing"). Acknowledge those positions, but understand that they are not the path toward resolution.

Instead, get people to talk about underlying interests—their needs, desires, concerns, and fears. The positions people take in a conflict are driven by these interests. If an employee is not confident about his skills in a certain realm, his abiding interest in not making a fool of himself will lead to a public position to avoid taking on assignments in that area.

Repeat, Rephrase, Reflect.

When someone would rather continue the conflict than resolve it, you need to be patient. One way to hold on is to repeat what they are saying, rephrase it in your own words to show you have heard and understood, and then invite the other person to join you as you reflect on the facts and circumstances of the case.

Here are five tactics for that conversation:

1. Explain the **consequences** and **benefits** of his actions.
2. Explain how his actions conflict with your **values**.
3. Explain how the long-term **disadvantages** outweigh short-term convenience.
4. Explain how his actions are **hurting others**.
5. Explain how he is eroding his professional **reputation**.

Skilled leaders can follow these guidelines to prevent conflict from damaging the relationships in the workplace. ■

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