THE INSTITUTE OF
LEADERSHIP
& MANAGEMENT

Leadership Essentials

Dealing With Conflict

A collaborative leader deals effectively with conflict

Conflict occurs when one person (or a group) perceives that another person (or a group) is preventing them achieving their needs and goals or is blocking them from expressing their values and beliefs in a way that they think is reasonable.

Conflict is a perfectly normal part of being a human being. It can be internal – inside our heads or it can be external – with others. Conflict can be toxic, harmful and destructive (dysfunctional). It can also be a powerful driver of change, learning and growth (functional).

Conflict will occur when you have a group of people working together, even if they all share a common goal, measurable targets and a clear vision. Conflict arises because people think and behave differently, they have individual personalities, differing communication styles and sense of priorities.

A degree of conflict can be good for an organisation. It introduces new ideas, positive challenge and prevents group thinking; and some disagreements are minor, with no long term consequences. However, conflict that generates negative emotions (irritation, anger), is something to be avoided. More serious conflict can be disruptive and has the potential to be costly if an employee alleges harassment, bullying or worse.

Many leaders try to avoid conflict at all costs and when it arises tend to manage disagreements inappropriately. However, dealing with conflict constructively can lead to increased productivity, new ideas being generated and personal development for all team members.

Conflict prevention is generally considered the best policy by creating a supportive, positive and stable team environment. This will help to reduce the likelihood of unhelpful conflicts developing. A good working environment will establish a base level of respect and trust between team members / colleagues and enable all individuals within the group to focus on their responsibilities

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5 simple rules for managing conflict in your team

1 **Take action early, problems ignored always get worse!**

2 **Deal with the issues directly – talk to all those involved, one to one, in private**

3 **Be a mediator if more than one person is involved**

4 **Keep a record of the action you have taken**

5 **If it is likely to lead to a disciplinary or grievance (or legal action), seek advice from your own line manager and/or HR**

Symptoms of conflict / things for you to do:

Check
- How did it start?
- Could you have done anything earlier?
- What might it develop into if no action is taken now?

- Gain a clear understanding of the issue or situation.
- Say what you have seen or heard, or have been told, citing specific examples.
- Do not say what you think they meant or why you think they did something.
- Ask what they are prepared to do to resolve the issue.
- Avoid words like 'I think' or 'I feel' as these are subjective and make the situation more personal.

- Don't take sides.
- Speak to each party separately.
- If they agree, bring them together to resolve the issue.

- Prepare the questions you want to ask beforehand.
- Note down each person's response.
- If something very specific is said that seems critical, try to note it verbatim.
- Email individuals to confirm what was said and what they have agreed or been asked to do.

- Always check with your line manager or someone in HR if you suspect potential disciplinary or grievance issues.
- Check the organisation's disciplinary and grievance policy and procedures.
- Refer to the legislative guidance on disputes and problems at work (for example in the UK this is available from ACAS).

Conflict is a natural fact of life and you may find conflict occurs in your organisation for some of the following reasons:

- Limited resources
- Differing customer service perspectives
- Differing levels of understanding of complex business-related issues

- Contest for a promotion or opportunity
- Different levels of power and authority
- Different beliefs, values and perceptions

The most important skills and behaviours you need to demonstrate to resolve conflict are:

- Personal resilience
- Integrity
- Respect for others

- Clear communication
- Above all make sure you keep accurate and detailed notes

Approach

It is important to handle all conflict issues promptly and sensitively, to be reasonable and non- judgemental in your approach. This will help to diffuse the situation and prevent it from escalating into a more serious matter.

Difficult conversations

Conflict within your team may inevitably mean you have to conduct some difficult conversations. Detach yourself from the immediate behaviour of the individual and focus on the specific actions required from them when having this discussion. Ask the individual to describe ideal behaviours and ask them to benchmark themselves against this, and raise the standards expected of employees throughout your discussion. In having regular, open and honest conversations with your team members, you may be able to avoid conflict as all parties know what is expected of them.

There may be times when you need to undertake difficult conversations as part of the performance management process, when dealing with under-achievement (and you may wish to refer to Leadership Essentials No. 18 Managing Performance). It is important to handle these conversations sensitively to avoid the situation escalating to one of conflict.

Mediation

Sometimes conflict can be resolved by involving a third party to mediate between those involved in a dispute. If you appoint a mediator or act as one, you need to make sure that the mediator is neutral and is aware that their role is not to make decisions, but to help the individuals involved reach a mutual agreement that satisfies their needs and concerns.

Post-conflict approach

Dealing with conflict, even if it is successfully resolved, can be uncomfortable and disconcerting to most team members so it is important that you show leadership to get the team back on track. This can include things like holding a de-briefing meeting to discuss what happened, how it was resolved and how to avoid conflict happening again.

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