Resolving Conflict

Conflict happens! And when it does, the leader must be prepared to address issues between parties. Some leaders have a low tolerance for confrontation and avoid intervening in conflict between followers. They take the attitude, “The issue will work itself out.” Others are quick to squelch disagreement between parties by discouraging contention but not helping the individuals resolve issues. In this case, issues linger below the surface and may be displayed through less overt skirmishes or passive – aggressive behaviors. By being proactive, a leader can address conflict and resolve issues before they spread like a virus or escalate to war.

Conflict is a natural part of working and living with others. Sometimes conflict is positive, bringing to light different ideas, strategies and methods for conducting business. Positive conflict can generate a creative or competitive tension that makes an organization dynamic. Conflict can also be negative. When the competition between parties turns to fighting, or tension reaches the breaking point, people and organizations can be damaged.
For the focus of this article, conflict is defined as a disagreement between two parties over any particular issue. The purpose of this article is to examine several of the sources of these issues, accompanying behaviors and means of practicing resolution.

**SOURCES OF CONFLICT**

People become conflicted about many things. In any area where there is a difference, there is potential for disagreement. Areas of potential conflict that impact people universally are: gender, age, nationality, territory, cultural background, ideology, power, resources, priorities and personality – to name a few.

Just take a look around your home, neighborhood, community, office, business, industry, state, nation and world and you will find great potential for conflict. Here are a few examples:

**Home:** How many times a day do people living under the same roof experience disagreement over who was supposed to do what and when; what belongs to whom; and why one sibling has to do something the other doesn’t have to do?

**Neighborhood:** Most neighborhoods have households at odds over how homeowners or tenants should keep their dwelling; someone’s cat, dog or kids; or the noise level down the street.

**Community:** There is no better place to see conflict at work than at a city council meeting. Debates over services and expenditures, rules and regulations, and use or misuse of public funds abound in communities today as municipalities struggle to make ends meet.

**Office:** What’s the latest office scandal? Who is undermining who and why? How come so and so got promoted but what’s-his-name didn’t?

**Business:** How often is one location favored over another among banking centers; one department has better access to resources than another; or so and so in Houston has more clout than a counterpart in Boston?

**Industry:** A large religious group is experiencing a split among members on an issue and will divide into two camps at variance. Technology or clinical members of a health care trade association want to break away and form their own group in order to focus on their specific needs.

**State:** One state is going to court with another over water rights from a river running through both. Minors from state A are travelling across lines to purchase alcoholic beverages due to the lower drinking age in state B. Fans from one state university seem to hate fans from their rival state’s university, and are playing out those feelings in hostile behaviors creating crime and economic problems for hospitality businesses in both communities.

**Nation:** One nation is having difficulty with illegal immigration from a neighboring nation. Another nation is at odds over long standing political ideologies between the two entities, making for a fragile peace and perpetual chance of war. And still, a third nation is engaged in a trade war with a fourth nation, hurting the inhabitants of both.

**World:** You get the picture!

**CONFLICT BEHAVIORS & COMMUNICATION**

**DISC Behavioral Styles & Conflict**

There is always potential for individuals with different behavioral styles to misinterpret or misunderstand one another. In the module on Recognizing & Relating to Four Behavioral Styles, this series examined the DISC Model of Behavioral Styles and identified Dominant, Interactive, Steady and Compliant types as follows (Allesandra & Associates, Inc., 2010):

“D” or Dominant types are Faster-Paced/Decisive & Goal-oriented.

“I” or Interactive types are Faster-Paced/Spontaneous & People-oriented.

“S” or Steady types are Slower-Paced/Relaxed & Relationship-oriented.

“C” or Compliant types are Slower-Paced/Systematic & Task-oriented.

When it comes to everyday workplace priorities, such as building relationships, achieving results,
Managing change or making decisions, people with different behavioral styles prioritize things differently which can easily lead to conflict. Here are the priorities of each:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Style</th>
<th>Priority</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>The Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steady</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliant</td>
<td>The Task</td>
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</tbody>
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Dominant types may confront or become combative with others who stand in the way of their goals. Interactive types may overlook areas of conflict over fear of alienating friends. Steady types may avoid conflict in order to preserve peace and harmony. Compliant types may debate over facts when they know they are right, but may also avoid confrontations that lead to hostility. These behaviors can vary significantly according to the individual’s level of maturity, how high the stakes of the issue may be and a variety of other influencing factors.

**Passive, Aggressive & Assertive Communication**

In addition to one’s behavioral style, how you express yourself in any given situation has a lot to do with arriving at a favorable post-conflict outcome. Some individuals, in the throes of conflict, communicate passively and others aggressively. If you choose to address conflict with another person, or between two parties, it’s essential to communicate in a manner most fitting for the particular point of contention. Assertive communication usually - but not always - fulfills this need.

**Passive Communication**

A person displaying a passive style of communication:
- Allows others to chose when, where and what will happen.
- Avoids saying what he or she wants or feels.
- Asks to be turned down with expressions like, “If you wouldn’t mind.”
- Gives up if the first request is refused.
- Uses such empty phrases as “you know” or “I mean.”

- Hides real feelings to avoid disagreements.
- Uses many vague words hoping to be understood.
- Manipulates through a helpless, “poor me” attitude.
- Criticizes what he or she does.
- Apologizes often.
- Cowers in posture, voice and manner.

**Aggressive Communication**

A person showing an aggressive style of communication:
- Uses the word “You” to send messages that hurt, accuse or blame.
- Uses threats, labels and putdowns.
- Sets up “win-lose” situations rather than negotiating.
- Ambushes people when they are unprepared or preoccupied.
- Listens little or only to what he or she wants to hear.
- Exaggerates with such words as “always” or “never.”
- Manipulates and chooses for others.
- Uses one-upmanship.
- Intimidates others with an exaggerated show of power.
- Threatens others in posture, voice and manner.

**Assertive Communication**

A person using an assertive style of communication:
- Uses the word “I” showing ownership of feelings or needs.
- Negotiates clearly and directly for what is wanted.
- Leans forward in a relaxed manner and makes eye contact.
- Makes references to specific behaviors; uses active listening to find a “win-win” solution.
- Sets a convenient time to discuss or negotiate things.
- Sets a firm time and follows up to avoid being put off.
- Avoids exaggerating with words such as “always” or “never.”
- Keeps the communication short and simple and calmly repeats appropriate requests.
PRACTICING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Considering Possible Outcomes

In addition to recognizing conflict sources and the need for assertiveness, one must consider possible outcomes of any given conflict. Those outcomes include mutual defeat, defeat of one’s opponent, reaching a compromise, surrender to an opponent or arriving at a mutual victory. These outcomes can also be translated as follows:

• Lose/Lose
• Win/Lose
• Win Some/Lose Some
• Lose/Win
• Win/Win

When taking aim at a “desirable” outcome, one must consider the situation. Although a Win/Win outcome sounds ideal, this scenario is hard to achieve unless both parties make that end result their goal. If one party is determined to defeat the other, due to competition or hostility, one may have to take a Lose/Win approach. And, while compromise may sometimes be the best choice for both parties, there are also times when both parties choose to risk all and arrive at a Lose/Lose outcome.

Joint problem-solving presents an ideal at which to take aim. With joint problem solving both parties accept that they both have a problem and recognize they are both losing. This approach takes a future focus while looking for a creative solution and agreed criteria for success (Cormack, D., 1989).

Using a Mediator

In order to facilitate a joint problem-solving meeting, parties can call upon the expertise of a mediator. A mediator is generally considered objective, responsible and acceptable to both parties. He or she must be detached from the conflict, understand the positions of both parties and be skilled with both problems and people. A mediator must be able to lead both parties in dialogue and discussion while working to develop cooperation between parties and creating a common vision (Cormack, D., 1989).

Promoting Common Vision & Practicing Joint Problem Solving

A common vision is an overriding target that both groups accept as essential and achievable. This vision moves the parties from Lose/Lose or Win/Lose to Win/Win. The joint problem-solving approach moves participants to a higher order, an inclusive vision that answers the question, “How do we both get what we want?”

Developing a common vision through the use of a facilitator and joint problem solving helps parties must reach a basis for reconciliation that includes fairness, mutual respect and consensus (Cormack, D., 1989).

CONFLICT STYLES

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) has been selected as an assessment and learning tool to accompany this session on Resolving Conflict (2007). Course participants are encouraged to take the assessment to determine their preferred modes and to read the associated materials in order to better understand the various ways humans approach conflict. The materials will help readers better understand which modes are best applied under what circumstances and why.

The TKI describes one’s behavior along two basic dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. These two dimensions can be used to define give conflict handling modes as:

Competing = assertive and uncooperative
Collaborating = assertive and cooperative
Compromising = intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness
Avoiding = unassertive and uncooperative
Accommodating = unassertive and cooperative

RESOURCES