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Preventing Workplace Conflict: Resolution Methods

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Introduction

“Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.” —William James

This training focuses on ways supervisors can work with their employees to resolve conflict in the workplace. It provides practical steps and techniques that everyone can learn.

Causes of Conflict

Conflict is any situation in which your concerns or desires differ from those of another person.

Some examples of workplace conflict are:

- Disagreement between employees
- Employees who just don't get along (there isn't an apparent conflict)



Causes of Conflict

Conflict arises because employees:

- Have different points of view
- Communicate to one another differently
- Spend large amounts of time together
- Depend on one another to “get the job done”
- Established expectations of one another are not communicated and then not met



Causes of Conflict

Conflict does not always have to be negative. When employees are able to challenge one another's ideas in a supportive environment, new ideas are generated and fostered.

Causes of Conflict

It is important to remember that conflict will always exist between employees. Effective supervisors have the skills to manage the conflict process and turn disagreements into ideas.

Examples of Healthy vs. Damaging Conflict

Healthy Conflict

- Disagreements that are communicated in a supportive environment that foster the generation of new ideas or ways to problem solve.
- Tension that increases awareness or sheds light on a growing workplace problem.

Damaging Conflict

- Name-calling
- Personal attacks
- Silent and withdrawn, afraid to speak up
- Cliques, gossip and rumors
- Lack of mutual respect



Importance of Resolving Conflict

Why should we get involved?

It's their problem, right?

WRONG! Managers must learn to manage conflicts amongst their team members so that the business continues to run effectively and objectives are met.



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Consequences of Letting Conflict Fester

- Employees not involved in the conflict either “pile on” or withdraw from the conflict.
 - This requires employees to take sides or “check out” from work entirely.
 - Morale and productivity is lowered because employees are focused on the conflict.
 - Employees who work in teams are now divided because of the conflict.



Consequences of Letting Conflict Fester

- In extreme instances, unresolved conflict can lead to violent or aggressive situations.
 - Potential for employees to become injured.
 - The company may have legal risks associated with violent situations in the workplace.
 - Work will slow dramatically or can halt altogether.



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Steps in the Conflict Resolution Process

Steps in the Conflict Resolution Process

- The preparation phase
- Clarify the disagreement
- Define needs
- Establish a common goal for both parties
- Discuss ways to meet the common goal
- Determine the barriers to the common goal
- Agree on the best way to resolve the conflict
- Acknowledge the agreed solution and determine the responsibilities each party has in the resolution.

The process should be completed by all parties in the conflict together.



The Preparation Phase

The first step in the preparation phase is to conduct a thorough self-assessment on the conflict itself. Below are the questions I use to help conflicting parties think through the conflict and prepare for mediation. These questions are also useful for the typical everyday conflicts and disagreements that we all face.



The Preparation Phase

1. Is the conflict about one isolated event that shows little consistency with the rest of the relationship, or is it the latest in a series of conflicts revealing problems within the relationship as a whole?
2. What are my goals for the relationship, and how do my goals for this particular conflict affect them?



The Preparation Phase

3. Are my expectations so rigid that they won't allow the conflict resolution process to work?
4. Am I letting my own expectations to be shaped or distorted by other people not involved in the conflict?
5. Are my expectations taking into account the other party's needs, values, and constraints?
6. Am I expecting the other party to behave in ways I want them to, or think in ways I think they should? If so, what's up with that?



The Preparation Phase

7. What have I done to contribute to the cause and perpetuation of the conflict?
8. What misperceptions might the other party have of me?
9. What misperceptions might I have of the other party?



The Preparation Phase

10. What is it I need differently from the other party and what would that look like?
11. What am I willing to do for the other party to show my willingness to work through our issue?
12. What are some of the workable compromises I can come to the table with?



The Preparation Phase

By using these questions to self-assess and prepare, parties in conflict can put their focus more towards obtaining resolution than fault-finding.

Clarify the Disagreement

Clarify what the disagreement is.

Clarifying involves getting to the heart of the conflict. The goal of this step is to get both sides to agree on what the disagreement is.

Clarify the Disagreement

Tips:

- Discuss what needs are not being met on both sides of the conflict. Ensure mutual understanding.
- Obtain as much information as possible on each side's point of view.
- Continue to ask questions until you are certain that you, and each side of the conflict, understand the issue.



Define Needs

- Party 1 defines the problem and the impact it is having on him/her
- Party 2 summarizes what he/she heard
- Party 2 defines the problem and the impact it is having on him/her
- Party 1 summarizes what he/she heard
- Party 1 describes what he/she needs from the other to correct the problem...and seeks agreement from Party 2
- Party 2 describes what he/she needs from the other to correct the problem...and seeks agreement from Party 1



Establish a common goal for both parties

In this step of the process, both sides agree on the desired outcome of the conflict.

Establish a common goal for both parties

Tips:

- Discuss what each party would like to see happen.
- Find a commonality in both sides as a starting point for a shared outcome. That commonality can be as simple as “both sides want to end the conflict.”



Discuss ways to meet the common goal

Both sides work together to discuss ways that they can meet the goal they agreed upon in the previous step.

Discuss ways to meet the common goal

Tips:

- Brainstorm different approaches to meet the goal.
- Discuss until all the options are exhausted.



Determine the barriers to the common goal

In this step of the process, the two parties acknowledge what has brought them into the conflict.

Determine the barriers to the common goal

Tips:

- Ask, “If we could have the outcome that we both wanted, how would that look?”
- Define what can and cannot be changed about the situation.
- For the items that cannot be changed, discuss ways of getting around those road blocks.



Determine the barriers to the common goal

- Be mindful of your language

It is important to avoid assigning blame to the person you're speaking with, and taking note of the words you use will help you avoid falling into this trap. Try to use "I" statements that explain how you feel, and give examples of why you feel that way.



Determine the barriers to the common goal

- Listen carefully

Before jumping to conclusions, sit down with the person with whom you're in conflict and try to understand the issue fully. During the conversation, make sure you acknowledge his or her feelings and paraphrase their opinion back to them to enhance your comprehension.



Determine the barriers to the common goal

- Be respectful of differences

Workplaces are diverse places, today more than ever, and what is acceptable to one person may be offensive to another.

Agree on the best way to resolve the conflict

Both parties come to a conclusion on the best resolution.

Agree on the best way to resolve the conflict

Tips:

- Determine a solution that both sides can live with.
- Discuss the responsibility each party has in maintaining the solution.
- Settle on a means of ensuring that this conflict does not arise again.



Acknowledge the agreed solution and determine the responsibilities of each party in the resolution

Both sides own their responsibility in the resolution of the conflict and express aloud what they have agreed to.

Acknowledge the agreed solution and determine the responsibilities of each party in the resolution

Tips:

- Get both parties to acknowledge a win-win situation
- Ask both parties to use phrases such as “I agree to...” and “I acknowledge that I have responsibility for...”





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Conflict Resolution Policy



Purpose

Problems, misunderstandings and frustrations may arise in the workplace. It is [Company Name]'s intent to be responsive to its employees and their concerns. Therefore, an employee who is confronted with a problem may use the procedure described below to resolve or clarify his or her concerns.

The purpose of this policy is to provide a quick, effective and consistently applied method for a nonsupervisory employee to present his or her concerns to management and have those concerns internally resolved.

Step 1: Discussion with supervisor

- a. Initially, employees should bring their concerns or complaints to their immediate supervisor. If the complaint involves the employee's supervisor, the employee should schedule an appointment with that supervisor to discuss the problem that gave rise to the complaint within five working days of the date the incident occurred.
- b. The immediate supervisor should respond in writing to the complaint within five days of the meeting held with the complainant employee.



Step 2: Written complaint and decision

- a. If the discussion with the immediate supervisor does not resolve the problem to the mutual satisfaction of the employee and the supervisor, or if the supervisor does not respond to the complaint, the employee may submit a written complaint to the employee's director/department head. Employees may request assistance with writing their complaints from the human resource (HR) department.

The employee's director/department head should forward a copy of the complaint to the HR department.



Step 2: Written complaint and decision

The submission of the written complaint is due within five working days of the response from the supervisor. The complaint should include:

- The problem and the date when the incident occurred.
- Suggestions on ways to resolve the problem.
- A copy of the immediate supervisor's written response or a summary of his or her verbal response and the date when the employee met with the immediate supervisor. If the supervisor provided no response, the complaint should state this.



Step 2: Written complaint and decision

- b. Upon receipt of the formal complaint, the director/department head must schedule a meeting with the employee within five working days to discuss the complaint. Within approximately five working days after the discussion, the director/department head should issue a decision both in writing and orally to the employee filing the complaint.



Step 3: Appeal of decision

- a. If the employee is dissatisfied with the decision of the director/department head, the employee may, within five working days, appeal this decision in writing to the HR department.
- b. The HR department may call a meeting with the parties directly involved to facilitate a resolution or refer complaints to a review committee if it believes that the complaint raises serious questions of fact or interpretation of policy. The HR department may gather further information from involved parties.



Additional Guidance

If an employee fails to appeal from one level to the next level of this procedure within the time limits set forth above, the problem should be considered settled on the basis of the last decision, and the problem should not be subject to further consideration.

Because problems are best resolved on an individual basis, the conflict resolution procedure may be initiated only by individual employees and not by groups of employees. All complaints must be made in good faith.

Additional Guidance

[Company Name] reserves the right to impose appropriate disciplinary action for any conduct it considers to be disruptive or inappropriate. The circumstances of each situation may differ, and the level of disciplinary action may also vary, depending on factors such as the nature of the offense, whether it is repeated, the employee's work record and the impact of the conduct on the organization.

No [Company Name] employee will be subject to retaliation for filing a complaint under this policy.



North Risk Partners Value-Added Services Hotline **(888) 667-4135**

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*You may also reach Synergy Human Resources by emailing hr@northriskpartners.com