

COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE WORKPLACE: AN AWARENESS WORKSHOP

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Conflict and disputes are a natural part of our daily existence but an uncomfortable issue and feeling for most people to address in a productive manner. Conflict directly influences communication, unfortunately usually as an impediment. Therefore, it is important for the members of any group or organization, which must depend upon communication for success, to be skilled at recognizing and managing conflict.

The academic and corporate climates are challenging for all people, but women have an additional stress balancing what their profession demands and also what burdens of culture and society have been placed upon them. Understanding one's style of managing conflict and being aware of the conflict styles of colleagues facilitates positive opportunities for productive communication.

This paper will specifically address; (1) defining conflict and how we traditionally manage it, (2) our own personal style of handling conflict, (3) understanding how our professional colleagues handle conflict, (4) managing conflict and why it is important, (5) how communication improves when conflict is addressed and processed productively, and (6) how, through improved communication, an individual can work more productively with a group, thus increasing group success.

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict is defined as an antagonistic state or action involving divergent ideas, interests, or persons. Conflict arises when the needs or wants of one person are perceived by that person as being denied to them by another. Dispute is defined as a matter in controversy between two or more parties which may, in varying degrees contribute to the animation and orchestration of conflict.¹ Traditionally, a person responds to conflict in one of three ways: fight, flight, or flow.

Handling conflict by fighting includes competition and aggressive confrontation. Competition indicates one person's use of power or authority over another. Competition defines a win-lose situation. Aggressive confrontation happens when one person attacks the other either physically or more often in a professional setting, verbally. This usually happens when two people are not willing to listen to each other's side of the problem or to talk about it; instead they attack, blame, or put-down the other's idea. The resolution for this type of conflict is of a competitive nature, a win-lose or lose-lose solution. Both parties may yell, vent, and be angry and the situation usually escalates when handled in this manner.

Flight is avoidance or denial of a conflict or dispute. Denial is when someone does not admit there is a problem. Avoidance happens when someone chooses to ignore the problem or withdraw from it. The outcome in this situation usually results in a lose-lose outcome. No solution is usually achieved and both parties leave frustrated and distrustful of one another. Trust, to some degree, must be a factor in addressing conflict.

Flow is equated to problem solving in addressing a conflict. Problem solving is when people talk about the problem without insulting or blaming one another. They know that a problem exists, that they have a problem with one another, and they think of ways to solve it. Finally, they choose a solution that is best for the situation at hand and for everyone involved.² The outcome is a win-win situation.

PERSONAL STYLES OF HANDLING CONFLICT

Our personal styles of handling conflict can be divided into five categorical areas: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.³ Most of us operate from many of these areas but we will primarily use one or two specific areas in dealing with conflict. Understanding our style of handling conflict helps us in identifying what positions we may be entrenched in and also gives us the opportunity to change our style if needed or desired. No specific style of handling conflict is right or wrong. However, some styles may yield more productive results for a person both personally and professionally.

Gender and self-image also must be considered when discussing conflict styles. Research indicates that our ability to handle conflict is often related to our level of self-confidence. Men and women between the ages of 18-34 are more highly sensitive to conflict, because they are still in the process of developing a sense of identity. Women are traditionally raised to view criticism and disputes as meaning something is wrong with them. Because of this, when a conflict arises, women generally assume the fault lay with them and not the other person or an outside variable. Generally speaking, women tend to internalize a conflict immediately and tend to externalize their success.⁴ 85% of all women in the United States claim to be highly self-critical. Based upon these facts, women and men are expected to handle conflict in very different ways.

YOUR AND YOUR COLLEAGUES CONFLICT STYLE

First, competing is viewed as forcing someone to your position of thinking in regard to a particular situation or being determined to “win” even when there is a better solution. Competitively oriented people often act in an aggressive and uncooperative manner. Win-lose power struggles and attempts to dominate are common. There are times when this method is most appropriate. However, men have been encouraged in our culture to dominate the workplace and “win at all costs” and women have been discouraged from this type of competitiveness.⁵

Second, avoiding is withdrawal from conflict. When faced with a potential conflict, an avoider seeks to distract attention from the issue or may attempt to ignore the issue entirely. Typically, this is a style presented more often by women than by men. Although women have moved into the professional communities of engineering and science, they are often not included in the communities entirely. Expectations from our culture are transferred onto women and men in the workplace. More often than men, women remain outside the heated discussions, inner cadres, and social networks in which research ideas are aired, exchanged, and evaluated.⁶ Because of these types of exclusions and the idea that these exclusions were indoctrinated into women when they were young girls, research demonstrates that women tend to be more avoiding and accommodating when in conflict. Depending on the circumstances, this behavior can be perceived either as evasive or as effective diplomatic maneuvering.

Accommodating, the third method of handling conflict, involves smoothing over a situation. It is the opposite of competing. Women are often encouraged to be the peacemakers in the office, even when they are not one of the disputing parties. People who favor this style often sacrifice their needs and desires in order to keep the peace and to make others happy.

Compromising consists of the sharing ideas and creating a solution, although the solution is sometimes created prematurely. It is an intermediate, “middle-of-the-road” approach to conflict. This method of addressing conflict can be viewed as productive as long as neither party believes they sacrificed too much, yielding an insufficient or incomplete resolution. Each side gives up something to gain something. A person who practices the collaborative style neither fully avoids the problem nor fully collaborates with the other party. The compromising mode is at the midpoint of both the cooperative and assertive scales.

Finally, collaboration is similar to compromising in the fact both individuals in conflict are communicating with one another. Collaboration is considered more productive and successful because the necessary time is taken to create the best possible solution. Both parties have communicated, considered each others position and needs, and together

created a solution that both parties can feel and be committed to. People with a collaborative orientation tend to demonstrate highly assertive and highly cooperative behavior. Collaborative people value mutual benefit, integration, and win-win solutions. The conflict style opposite of collaborating is avoiding.

MANAGING CONFLICT

The method of managing conflict will depend upon the situation at hand. All of the above mentioned methods of handling conflict will be necessary at different times. It is important to realize that each method can be beneficial under certain circumstances. For example, when there are time constraints in making a decision, compromising may be necessary because there are necessary time constraints to adhere to and collaboration would be too laborious.

People are not locked into one style of conflict management, and potentially can utilize all of the styles. However, individual differences and experiences tend to make each person more comfortable with one or two styles; these styles, therefore, are the ones that the person is most likely to employ.

The importance in managing conflict is deciding what style is best for you to use in a given situation. How you respond to conflict and managing disputes should be within your control. The style you choose to use should depend upon the given situation, nature of the conflict, and constraints of time. A style should not be followed because of societal constraints regarding what is appropriate for your gender or because of your discomfort with a different conflict resolution style. Remember there is a history within each of us that taught us how we handle our conflicts. Without conscious effort and change, you will not change your style of resolving conflict. If you are comfortable and content with your conflict resolution style this is wonderful. However, if you are resisting change because it is uncomfortable, consider the following: often we believe that change would be easier without people - without ourselves or others involved. However, remember that people, including ourselves, do not resist change; we only resist being changed by others but not ourselves.⁷ Changing your style of conflict is within your control and is your choice.

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION INCREASES PRODUCTIVITY

Communication between colleagues is improved when issues, including uncomfortable and controversial issues, can be addressed in straightforward manner. The aim in conflict and addressing disputes is understanding, not blame.⁸ Improving communication in the workplace means that conflict will have to be addressed. We know conflict is part of the workplace and our collegial relationships, but we often do not want to address it because

our social organization within our culture defines conflict as wrong, at least wrong for women.⁹ However, the conflict itself is not harmful. It can be made helpful or harmful depending on how one handles and responds to the conflict. Overcoming the social stigma towards conflict can create a workplace that is friendlier and more productive.¹⁰

Addressing conflict is good for an organization. When a group understands conflict and how to work with it, communication and productivity increases. Individuals in workplace will view disagreements as opportunities to make things better. Conflict is viewed as a mode of give and take. People will develop skills to be wise enough to compete when necessary and surrender when appropriate.

INCREASED GROUP SUCCESS

With the idea of openly addressing conflict in the workplace, the work of the group will be more successful. Colleagues can communicate more freely through developing trust of the conflict resolution process. Openly disagreeing and working through conflicts reduces the tension in the work environment. The following guidelines should be considered when addressing conflict in the workplace:

- describe the other person's behavior objectively
- use concrete terms
- describe a specified time, place, and action
- describe the action, not the "motive"
- acknowledge your feelings
- express them as calmly as possible
- state feeling positively as related to goal
- direct yourself to the specific, problem behavior
- ask for change in behavior
- specify (if appropriate) what you are willing to change to make the agreement
- reaffirm the other's ability to make the change
- end on a positive (not necessarily happy) note

When these guidelines are adhered to by people in conflict, resolution of the conflict is obtained, and the disputing parties feel more comfortable with their work environment. When people feel comfortable with their workplace productivity is higher and, most importantly, people feel good about themselves.

CONCLUSION

In conflict situations, there are many ways to address the situation. There is no "best way" to handle all conflicts other than being aware of your stance and the stance of the



person you are having a dispute with. Remember: there is a time for flight and a time to fight. You should choose the battles, challenges, and conflicts that are important for you. In choosing your conflicts, consider the following in deciding how you will respond:

- how invested in the relationship are you
- how important is the issue to you
- do you have the energy for the conflict
- are you aware of the potential consequences
- are you ready for the consequences
- what are the consequences if you do not engage in the conflict

Conflict is a part of all of our lives; it is not a matter of whether we deal with conflict but how we are going to handle it. Conflict is an opportunity for a positive change.

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