

Conflict Management

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

How many of us hate conflict and confrontation with others? Handling difficult situations is the one area of people management that over two thirds of managers say they avoid wherever possible!

Other people's emotions are the problem. Conflict triggers responses within us all that may range from withdrawal to anger. Few of us feel comfortable in such situations; however, conflict is healthy and forms an important and useful management tool where it is undertaken well.

So what is the difference between healthy and unhealthy conflict?

HOW IT IS HANDLED.

The consequences of handling it poorly or even avoiding it are the same in the long run. Both scenarios see an escalation of negativity and reduced productivity. In situations of blame and shame the individual becomes defensive, negative and reflects the blame back so avoiding self-responsibility or learning. Where confrontation is avoided the negativity comes from other team members who build resentments because of the unfair situation. Further down the line if the issues are still not confronted or resolved it is the best members of the team who leave for 'pastures greener' leaving the manager with even more of a problem.

So just how should we create healthy conflict? Like many management tools they take planning and preparations until you are confident and comfortable with them. Considering your emotional response, putting your feelings to one side and dealing with the facts is the starting point when planning your healthy conflict. This will always help you to avoid embarrassing situations where your own emotions have made you jump in headfirst only to find you have the facts wrong!

Taking a new and different approach in your communication can result in a new response from people who are used to your behavior. This is because we all get locked into behavioral patterns with people we know. By changing our behavior appropriately it elicits a new response from others, sometimes with startling effect.

Honesty and openness is the key here. Directness in communicating and resetting the boundaries that have been broken is a vital starting point. By stating how the situation makes you feel or think from an 'I' perspective you can start a process that helps the person look at things differently. Through carefully planned questions and confident statements of fact you communicate in a way

that allows the person either to know exactly where they stand or to learn from the situation. It really is interesting to see how most people take ownership of the conflict issue when confronted with questions and facts rather than blame and shame.

Even more of a problem is the situation of conflict within the team and between team members. Again this is an area of conflict often ignored and avoided by managers. However, avoid this at your peril as these situations generate high levels of negativity and loss of respect and trust from others in the team affected by the situation. With conflict within a team ranging from personality clashes to bullying they raise stress levels and reduce motivation and productivity. Handling these types of issues with speed, consistency and fairness sends positive messages to all the team.

In these situations skilled mediation techniques enable you to bring the parties together, openly communicate the issues and resolve the differences. Without positive intervention these negative relationships undermine the team and can 'rumble on' for years. That just makes for one unhappy team who are never able to reach their full potential or productivity.

Conflict management is a tool that we cannot afford to ignore if we want to create open, honest communication, harmony, trust, respect, motivation and a highly productive team.

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