

Conflict Resolution

Description:

This tool provides guidelines and steps to follow in preventing conflict, and dealing with conflict between two people, and within a team.

How it can be used:

Leading an organization of people means that conflict is inevitable. However, conflict can be constructive as long as it is managed effectively, directly and quickly.

When team members learn to see issues from the other side, it opens up new ways of thinking, which can lead to innovative solutions and healthy team performance. Use these guidelines and steps to proactively reduce conflict or to address conflict using positive approaches that ultimately build stronger teams.

Prevent Conflict

A good starting point is to be vigilant in preventing conflict. Consider the following skills and behaviours that all team members can learn to prevent conflict from becoming overwhelming within your workplace.

- Deal with conflict immediately – avoid the temptation to ignore it.
- Be open – if people have issues, they need to be expressed.
- Practice clear communication – articulate thoughts and ideas clearly.
- Practice active listening – paraphrase, clarify, question.
- Practice identifying assumptions – ask yourself "why" on a regular basis.
- Don't let conflict get personal – stick to facts and issues, not personalities.
- Focus on actionable solutions – do not dwell on what cannot be changed.
- Encourage different points of view – insist on honest dialogue and the expression of feelings.
- Do not look for blame – encourage ownership of the problem and solution.
- Demonstrate respect – if the situation escalates, take a break and wait for emotions to subside.
- Keep team issues within the team – talking outside creates an overall negative environment.

Resolving Conflict between Two People

Reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement between two parties in a conflict situation can be a challenge. Using a concrete approach with defined steps will help defuse the conflict while seeking a mutually agreeable resolution.

1. **Deal with anger or delay until the anger has dissipated**
 - a. It is difficult to negotiate an agreement if either of the people are too angry or are not acknowledging their angry feelings.
2. **Request the two parties to think through the following questions**
 - a. How does this conflict affect each of us?
 - b. What interests or values are at stake for each of us?
 - c. What prejudices or assumptions do we each have about the other?
 - d. What approaches or style would be best here (avoid, compete, collaborate)?
 - e. If I want to collaborate, what would be the right time and place to initiate that?
3. **Encourage a Positive Tone**
 - a. Acknowledge and validate the efforts of the two parties in working on the issue.

- b. Frame the intention and efforts as positive.
- 4. **Use Ground Rules (they may be stated or unstated)**
 - a. One person talks at a time.
 - b. Clarify that both parties are working to improve the situation.
 - c. Stay calm.
- 5. **Discuss and Define the Problem**
 - a. One at a time, each person shares issues and feelings.
 - b. Encourage effective listening and speaking techniques.
 - c. Have each person identify interests and needs.
 - d. If necessary, discuss assumptions, suspicions, and values.
 - e. Summarize new understandings.
- 6. **Brainstorm Possible Solutions**
 - a. Each person contributes ideas to satisfy interests and needs.
 - b. No criticism or evaluation of ideas at this stage.
 - c. Be creative.
 - d. Encourage "I can..." or "We could..." rather than "You should..." or "You'd better..."
- 7. **Evaluate and Choose Solutions**
 - a. Solutions should be:
 - i. Mutually agreeable
 - ii. Realistic
 - iii. Specific
 - iv. Balanced
 - b. Solutions should address the main interests of both parties.
- 8. **Follow Up**
 - a. Check back with both parties at an agreed-on time and date.

Resolving Team Conflict

Understanding and appreciating various viewpoints are key skills for all team members to develop. However, that requires well-developed team skills, particularly the ability to resolve conflict. This three-step process can help solve team conflict efficiently and effectively.

- 1. **Prepare for Resolution**
 - a. Acknowledge the conflict – The conflict has to be acknowledged before it can be managed and resolved. Once the team recognizes the issue, it can start the process of resolution.
 - b. Discuss the impact – As a team, discuss the impact the conflict is having on team dynamics and performance.
 - c. Agree to a cooperative process – Everyone involved must agree to cooperate to resolve the conflict.
 - d. Agree to communicate – The most important thing throughout the resolution process is for everyone to keep communications open. The people involved need to talk about the issue and discuss their strong feelings.
- 2. **Understand the Situation**
 - a. Confirm the team is ready to resolve the conflict – Understand the situation, and each team member's point of view. Remember that strong emotions are at work here so you have to get through the emotion and reveal the true nature of the conflict.
 - b. Clarify positions – Whether there are obvious factions within the team who support a particular option or approach, or each team member holds their own unique view, each position needs to be clearly identified.

- c. List facts, assumptions and beliefs underlying each position – What does each group or person believe and value? What information are they using as a basis for these beliefs? What decision-making criteria and processes have they employed?
- d. Analyze in smaller groups – Break the team into smaller groups, separating people who are in alliance. In the small groups, analyze each position and the associated facts, assumptions and beliefs. Which facts and assumptions are true and are more important to the outcome? Is additional information required to clarify points of uncertainty or contention? Understanding other people's positions will help the group gain a better understanding of different positions and can reveal new ideas and solutions. Everyone needs to feel heard and acknowledged if a workable solution is to be reached.
- e. Convene back as a team – After the group dialogue, each side is likely to be much closer to reaching agreement. The process of uncovering facts and assumptions allows people to step away from their emotional attachments and see the issue more objectively.

3. Reach Agreement

- a. The team must decide what decision or course of action to take.
- b. If further analysis is required, agree what needs to be done, by when and by whom, and plan to reach agreement within a particular time.
- c. Make sure the team is committed to work with the outcome of the proposed analysis.
- d. When conflict is resolved take time to celebrate and acknowledge the contributions of everyone. This builds team cohesion and confidence in their problem solving skills.