

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

“Before you give someone a piece of your mind, make sure you can get by on what’s left.”
– Old New England Adage

Are a couple of your group members constantly butting heads? Conflict within a group can have both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, conflict can encourage change and lead to creative results. On the negative side, unmanaged conflict can lead to frustration, arguments and eventually the dissipation of the group. Rarely is there a group which is conflict-free, but when managed effectively, conflict can improve the quality of a group and the interpersonal relationships within it.

In general, there are two types of conflict which arise in groups: interpersonal and organizational. Interpersonal conflict occurs when one perceives or values a situation differently than another person. This reflects the values one has developed throughout life. While one cannot change what she has been taught, she can learn new perspectives or ways to modify her behavior. Organizational conflict occurs when differences in group dynamics are not addressed, such as contradictory goals, poor communication and limited resources. Without attention, organizational conflict can easily turn into interpersonal conflict.

When the parties in conflict work together to resolve their differences, they will generally obtain the most positive results. They may, however, need a bit of guidance from an outside party. Employing the following strategies may help you reach an agreeable resolution for everyone involved:

- Define the situation. Both sides should have an opportunity to express what they view as the problem, as well as what they believe the other side feels the problem is. The problem may be completely misunderstood by one of the parties, in which case you may reach a resolution within this first step.
- Get the specifics. Apply the basic journalistic questions: Who is involved? What has happened? When and where did the problem begin? Why? How could it have been avoided (for future reference)?
- Brainstorm options. Work together to generate ideas about how to resolve the problem. Consider how it has been solved in the past if it is a recurring problem and whether the decision made now will set a precedent for the future.
- What if...? Predict the likely results of each option. Evaluate them together and decide upon the most viable option.
- Go for it – and don’t forget it. Implement your plan as soon as possible. Set some future meeting dates for the parties to discuss how successfully they have been able to resolve the conflict.

Seem like a lot of work? It may be, depending upon how long the conflict has been festering. If both groups are willing to work together to reach a compromise, what may seem like a huge

problem decreases greatly once they start talking.

There are some preventive measures you can take to avoid conflicts within your group:

Own your feelings. Use “I” statements to reduce defensiveness. For example: “I feel like I never get a chance to speak in our meetings” will relay your feelings in a much more effective manner than “You blab the entire hour and no one else can get a word in edgewise.”

Dismantle the rumor mill. Life without rumors. . .dare to dream? Make it happen in your organization. If gossip is spreading (“I heard our treasurer is resigning”) take two actions: Ask the speaker how he knows that, how he found out and so on. Then go to the source to verify or discredit the rumor.

Backstabbing – bad; Communication - good! Encourage group members to speak with whomever they are experiencing a problem rather than complaining to others about it. Open communication can prevent most problems before the two parties come to blows.

Get with the now. Focus on current issues. No matter how hard we try we cannot change the past, so there is no sense dwelling on it.

Although conflict is a natural element of group interaction, it can be detrimental if not managed correctly. There are many ways to deal with conflict – the most important component to keep in mind is communication. Few problems cannot be resolved if the lines of communication are open.

References:

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