Conflict & Cooperation In The Workplace - Is Conflict Bad?

Many of us think that conflict is always bad. That's not true. There are actually two kinds of conflict that occur, and learning which is which will help you handle each type better. Read the article to learn the differences. Please note that all material is protected by copyright.

Conflict & Cooperation In The Workplace

One topic that is of interest to most people in the workplace is conflict; how it works, how to avoid it, and how to deal with it when it occurs. It is indeed the rare organization that doesn't have to face the issue of conflict, and how to harness it so that it produces positive results rather than destruction.

In this article, we are going to look at some important elements of conflict, how it escalates over time, and suggest a few general strategies for dealing with it.

Two Types of Conflict

In the workplace (and almost any setting), you are likely to find two forms of conflict. The first is conflict about decisions, ideas, directions and actions. We will call this "substantive conflict" since it deals with disagreements about the substance of issues. The second form, "personalized conflict" is often called a personality conflict. In this form, the two parties simply "don't like each other much".

Substantive Conflict

Substantive conflict can occur on just about any issue, but its moving force is that the two parties simply disagree about an issue. This can be a good thing or a bad thing. Handled correctly parties in conflict can create, for themselves and those around them, the ability to resolve an issue with something creative, something better than either party's original position. Let's look at an example.

A branch manager and a staff member are in conflict over work hours. The branch manager expects all staff to work standard hours, beginning at 8:00 am so that the public will receive service starting first thing in the morning. The staff member wants to begin work at 9:00 am, because he has child care responsibilities. On several occasions the staff member has arrived late, which makes it appear to the manager that the employee is being deliberately unwilling to follow the rules.

Rather than the situation deteriorating, the parties approach the situation, not as one that should be won, but with an eye on solving a problem. After discussing the situation, (and understanding each other's needs), they realize that a) almost no customers call in the early morning b) the few that do can be handled by other staff who like to be in at 8:00, and b) there are more customers calling in between 4:00 and 5:00 pm. The parties agree that it makes sense to modify work hours. The result: a happier employee and better service.

The benefits would never have occurred if this conflict hadn't occurred, or if either party played the situation as if it was a game to be one by one person or the other. (Did anybody really lose in this situation?).

Personalized Conflict

While substantive conflict, if handled correctly, can be very productive, personalized conflict is almost never a good thing. There are several reasons. First personalized conflict is fuelled primarily by emotion (usually anger, frustration) and perceptions about someone else's personality, character or motives. When conflict is personalized and extreme each party acts as if the other is suspect as a person. Second, because personalized conflict is about emotion and not issues, problem solving almost never works, because neither party is really interested in solving a problem...in fact, in extreme cases, the parties go out of their ways to create new ones, imagined or real. Third, personalized conflicts almost always get worse over time, if they cannot be converted to substantive conflict. That is because each person expects problems, looks for them, finds them, and gets angrier.

Let's look at the previous example but change the way the situation was handled.

When the branch manager approached the staff member about the tardiness, he showed his irritation plainly. The staff member, already feeling under the gun, felt that the manager was being unfair, and accusatory, and became defensive. This, in turn, resulted in the manager "laying down the law", andthat was how the situation was left. After the discussion, the manager felt the employee was lazy and making excuses, while the employee felt the boss was out to get him.

Not surprisingly, the situation got worse. Even when the staff member was a few minutes late, for good reason, the boss jumped on him like a "ton of bricks". The employee, angered and frustrated, started taking longer coffee breaks and was away "sick" more frequently. The situation became increasingly polarized, with other people being sucked in, and taking sides, privately.

Oddly enough, the initial perceptions of both bossand employee became the truth. After a while the boss acted as if he was out to get the employee, and the employee acted as if he was lazy and uncaring. The original issue was all but forgotten, as the parties developed an intense dislike of each other.

Solution Strategies

<u>Identification</u>

When involved in a conflict situation, it is important that you are aware of whether you and the other party are dealing with a substantive conflict or a personalized one. It isn't always easy to tell them apart, and it is difficult to look honestly at oneself. Ask yourself the following questions:

Do I dislike the other person or get frustrated with him/her?

Do I see the other person as untrustworthy, and undeserving of respect?

Is my emotional reaction to the conflict appropriate to it's seriousness or lack thereof?

Do I really want to "win"?

If the answer to any of these question is yes, you may be setting yourself up for a personalized conflict that nobody can win in the long term.

With respect to the other person, one good indicator of a personalized conflict situation is that the person will try to counter your substantive point on the issue with a series of DIFFERENT reasons why you are wrong. For example, let's look at the following dialogue.

> Manager: We can't have you come in at 9:00 am because we need to answer the phones.
>
> Employee: That makes sense, but I checked and we get only one or two calls between 8:00 and 9:00 but we get between ten and twenty calls in the later afternoon.
>
> Manager: Well, maybe, but if you come in later, then soon everyone else will want to...

Note that in this case, the manager isn't really problem solving, but trying to find reasons to refuse the request, either because he doesn't "like" the other person, or for some other emotional reason we don't know about.

Move to Substantive Issues

Even in situations where both you and the other party have personalized the conflict, you can work to focus on specific issues. You have not direct control over another person, but you have control over yourself. By moving to the issues, and staying there, you will also encourage the other person to do so.

It isn't easy, of course. The trick is to try to put aside your negative perceptions about the other person, and not to dwell on them. That's an internal thing. Every time you think to yourself "what an idiot"(or all the other negative things), you make it that more difficult to stay focused on problem- solving, rather than winning, or getting your own way.

Work to Prevent Personalization

It is rare that personalization occurs just on the basis of two incompatible personalities. Usually, personalization occurs because conflict on substantive issues is handled badly. That is, one or both parties behaves in non-cooperative ways.