

HANDLING CONFLICT SITUATIONS.

Checklist 046

» INTRODUCTION

Disagreements, differences of opinion and conflicting perspectives on key issues inevitably arise in any context where people are working together. Whilst not all conflict is negative - creative solutions and new ideas can often emerge from the cut and thrust of debate – conflict can frequently become destructive. For example, negative emotions may be stirred up, poisoning the atmosphere, undermining morale, creating stress and destroying workplace relationships. Ultimately, this is likely to have an adverse effect on performance. If ignored, conflict can escalate or spread to affect others. Furthermore, if conflicts are not resolved, the situation may deteriorate, leading to litigation and damaging the organisation's reputation. Conflict can be costly in terms of time and money. It is therefore vital to manage conflict constructively.

Conflict may be between managers and their staff, between team members, departments, or managers. Conflict may be expressed openly, but it may also be hidden, in the form of irritation, resentment, loss of morale and lack of commitment. Hidden conflict is easy to miss and therefore can be particularly damaging. If nothing is done to address the underlying issues, conflict may escalate - from gossip, backbiting and criticism to shouting matches, threats and possible violence. Such consequences can often be prevented by taking early action to address the issues. This checklist focuses on steps for handling interpersonal conflict within the workforce, as opposed to conflict with customers, which requires a different form of resolution.

» DEFINITION

Conflict exists when disagreements lead to arguments and struggles between people with competing ideas and/or personal interests. There are many sources of conflict in the workplace - differences of opinion, dissatisfaction with working conditions or remuneration, excessive workloads, lack of recognition or promotion, perceptions of discriminatory or unfair treatment, feelings of insecurity, fear of redundancy, clashes of personality, misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication and differing expectations of what constitutes appropriate behaviour - to name but a few.

» ACTION CHECKLIST

1. Be aware of conflict

Keep your eyes and ears open for changes in workplace climate and any early signs of developing conflict. Don't turn a blind eye to symptoms of hidden conflict. Conflict can only be safely ignored if it is momentary and unlikely to escalate. Ignoring conflict may be an easy option initially, but in most cases it does not help and will create a more difficult situation to resolve later.

2. Take a considered and rational approach to conflict

Stay calm and ensure that you are able to take a considered, rational and impartial approach to the situation. If you are personally involved, you may need to ask someone else to handle the issue. Avoid the temptation to adopt the instinctive reactions of 'fight or flight'. Neither of these approaches is constructive: 'flight' avoids the issue and doesn't resolve the conflict; 'fight' provokes greater conflict and may intimidate the parties involved.

Avoid passive behaviour - do not take an apologetic stance and accept all points of view whether they are right or wrong. Similarly, avoid aggressive behaviour – do not take an authoritarian approach and fail to listen to reasoned argument

Instead, aim to take an assertive stance, while treating all parties with respect and listening to all points of view. Take care with your use of language and your body language while dealing with people involved in conflict situations. Careless or thoughtless comments can cause offence and exacerbate the conflict. Listen carefully to any evidence offered and take notes. Most importantly, be neutral and focus on the facts.

3. Investigate the situation

Take time to find out what has happened, who is involved, how people are feeling, and what the issues are. Don't pre-judge the issue or jump to conclusions. Speak individually and confidentially to those involved and listen actively to make sure you understand their point of view. This can be checked by summarising what they have said and reflecting it back to them. Try to identify any underlying causes of conflict which may not be immediately obvious. For example, a member of staff may be in apparent conflict with colleagues, while the root cause is their perception that a supervisor is treating them unfairly. Be aware that those involved may have differing perceptions of the same situation. Avoid being pulled into the middle of the argument and taking sides.

4. Decide how to tackle the conflict

Having examined the situation, decide what kind of action is appropriate. Ask yourself:

- › Is this a serious matter or relatively trivial? Could it become serious?
- › Should organisational discipline or grievance procedures be invoked?
- › Is the matter within your sphere of authority or should it be referred to a superior?
- › Are any legal issues involved? In situations where the law comes into play (e.g. the Equality Act 2010) it is advisable to consult with your HR department before you take any action
- › Would the participation of a trade union representative be appropriate?
- › Would it be best to make a ruling on the issue yourself, or would an informal gathering to discuss the problem be helpful? Will the parties accept your ruling?
- › Is time needed for heated emotions to subside before moving forward?

The answers to these questions will help you decide what action to take. For all sorts of reasons, there may be situations where formal processes, including legal proceedings, may need to be invoked – if in doubt, consult your HR department.

However, many issues can be resolved without resorting to costly legal cases. In most cases a mutually agreed mediated solution will be more effective than an imposed solution which may leave all parties dissatisfied. Consider how you can get those involved together to exchange views and explore the issues. Do you have access to mediators (formal or informal)?

5. Let everyone have their say

If you are able to get the parties together, you may be able to reach a satisfactory solution. Take a positive, friendly and assertive approach to the meeting and set ground rules for the session. Assertive behaviour will encourage the parties to express their thoughts honestly and openly, understand the causes of conflict and

find solutions. Make sure that everyone has the chance to explain their point of view and concerns. People will be more willing to relinquish entrenched positions and consider compromise if they feel that their point of view has been understood and their concerns taken on board.

6. Identify options and agree on a way forward

This is the most important and often the most difficult part of the process. The following steps may be helpful in reaching agreement:

- › create an atmosphere where all parties are able to speak openly and honestly and where they can make concessions without losing face
- › acknowledge emotional issues as these are often at the heart of it and thus will need to be resolved. However, don't allow them to take over
- › consider carefully the extent to which you need to control the meeting and intervene in the discussion
- › explore the reasons for the disagreement
- › identify any misconceptions or misunderstandings which are blocking progress
- › encourage the parties to examine their own positions and identify any common ground with others
- › look for points which may be negotiable and seek win/win solutions which take the interests of all parties into account
- › ask the parties to put forward preferred solutions
- › allow time for reflection
- › assess each option and help the parties to agree on which represents the best way forward
- › secure the commitment of all parties to any agreement and agree a review point.

If no progress is made, a period of reflection may help, but ultimately it may be necessary to bring in another manager or to consider external assistance from a specialist in mediation, ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) or arbitration. In these difficult cases, where complete consensus is impossible, you should aim for a way forward that is acceptable to all, even if it is not the preferred option for all parties involved.

7. Implement what has been agreed

It is important to ensure that everyone is clear about what has been decided and takes personal responsibility for any actions which have been agreed. In some cases a written agreement may be appropriate. Be careful here if there is any embarrassment of any of the parties involved, for example if it involves public apologies.

8. Evaluate how things are going

Don't assume that the issue has been finally resolved. Continue to keep an eye on the situation and evaluate how well the solution is working. If the problem reappears it may be necessary to take further action.

9. Consider preventative strategies for the future

Think about the lessons that can be learned from the conflict and the way it was handled. What could be done better next time? How could you develop your conflict management skills? You may wish to consider training or other forms of professional development on influencing, mediation or dispute resolution techniques for yourself or a colleague.

Looking at the broader context, consider what action can be taken to improve working relationships and encourage a culture of open communication and consultation. Fostering a sense of group identity and encouraging employees to see themselves as working towards a common cause is a good way of lessening conflict in the future. Consider whether an organisational procedure for dispute resolution or mediation is needed. Think about whether there is something about the way the unit works that encourages this conflict behaviour and if this can be 'fixed'.

Managers should avoid:

- › ignoring signs of growing conflict among team members
- › jumping to conclusions about the source of conflict before investigating thoroughly
- › launching in too early or pre-empting discussion by imposing their own solution.

BOOKS

Mediation: a practical guide to resolving workplace issues, Sarah Podro and Rachel Suff
London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2013

Resolving conflicts at work: a guide to negotiation and joint problem-solving in the workplace,
Steve Hodder
Cirencester: Management Books 2000, 2012

Managing conflict at work: understanding and resolving conflict for productive working relationships, Clive Johnson and Jackie Keddy
London: Kogan Page, 2010

Working with the enemy: how to survive and thrive with really difficult people, Mike Leibling
London: Kogan Page, 2009

The essential guide to workplace mediation and conflict resolution: rebuilding relationships, Nora
Doherty and Marcelas Guyler
London: Kogan Page, 2008

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at:
www.managers.org.uk/library

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Group thinking, Randall Peterson
Business Strategy Review, spring 2012, vol 23 no 1, pp 48-50

Up for discussion, Carly Chynoweth
People Management, June 2011, pp 44, 46

These articles are available for members to download from CMI's library. More information at
www.managers.org.uk/library

INTERNET RESOURCES

ACAS

Section on disputes and conflict in the Advice A to Z includes advisory booklet on managing conflict at work:
www.acas.org.uk

ORGANISATION

ACAS

Euston Tower, 286 Euston Road, London, NW1 3JJ
Tel: 08457 474747 Web: www.acas.org.uk



NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

- › Unit DB8 Manage conflict in teams
- › Unit DD5 Manage conflict in the broader work environment



MORE INFORMATION

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