Strategies for Managing Workplace Conflict

PRESENTERS:
Shenita Brokenburr and Jamie O’Donnell
Human Resources, Workforce Diversity and UW Service Center
UW System Administration

Today’s Objectives
At the end of this session, participants will be more familiar with:

- Definition of conflict
- How you (and others) handle conflict
- Characteristics of different conflict styles
- Cause and value of conflict
- Conflict Management Solutions
Getting Started:
How do you handle conflict?

What is conflict?

Conflict (definition)
When two or more parties disagree, have divergent views and/or other differences.
- Parties are interdependent
- Could happen between employees, departments, managers or groups of people
- Can arise over a variety of matters, work-related or not
- Resolution of conflict to mutual satisfaction cannot occur without mutual effort.
What causes conflict?

- Lack of understanding/misunderstanding
- Personality clashes
- Competition for resources
- Authority issues
- Lack of cooperation
- Differences over methods or style
- Low performance
- Value or goal differences

About conflict

- Usually not random.
- Reflects systemic processes and patterns.
- You can effectively manage conflict by
  - Understanding what causes conflict
  - Identifying patterns and causes of conflict
  - Developing successful approaches to deal with conflict
More about conflict

Conflict might

- Recede or evolve
- Go from informal to formal challenges, contest or disputes
- Result in harm or good
- Be amenable to mutual resolution or require intervention
- Be legitimate or highly petty, misguided or irrational.

Common sources of Workplace Conflict

- Environment
  - Economic
  - Legal
  - Demographic
  - Political/Social

- Individual
  - Personality
  - Stability
  - Health

- Organizational
  - Profitability
  - Productivity
  - Leadership
  - Governance
  - Structure
  - Ownership

- Workplace
  - Work
  - Technology
  - Workforce
  - Working Conditions
Handling Workplace Conflict

Techniques Used to Handle Conflict

- Avoid the person or subject
- Change the subject
- Try to understand the other person’s point of view
- Get another person to decide who is right
- Play the martyr
- Give in
- Apologize
- Try to identify specifically what you agree or disagree on
- Whine or complain to get your way
- Pretend to agree
- Admit that you are wrong, even if you do not believe you are
- Fight it out
- Turn the conflict into a joke
- Work toward a mutual solution

How do you react to conflict?
5 Conflict Management Styles

- Accommodating
- Avoiding
- Competing
- Compromising
- Cooperative problem-solving

Conflict management style

**Accommodating**

- Put their interests last and let others have what they want.
- Believes that the relationship (friendship) is more important than anything else.
- May be useful when the conflict is over a fairly unimportant issue.
- Can build good will.
### Conflict management style

**Avoiding**
- Does not get involved in a conflict.
- “You decide and leave me out of it.”
- Retreat and get away from everyone and everything.
- Appropriate when there is a clear advantage to waiting to resolve the conflict.

### Conflict management style

**Competitive**
- Person puts his/her interests before anyone else’s.
- *I want what I want when I want it!*
- Little or no willingness to cooperate.
- May ruin relationships.
- Can be necessary when the outcome is extremely important and an immediate decision need to be made.
Conflict management style

Compromising
- Important to satisfy some of my needs.
- “Let’s split the difference.”
- “Something is better than nothing.”
- Can help get to solutions and is good for overcoming impasses.

Conflict management style

Cooperative Problem-Solving
- Enables people to work together
- Win-win: gives a little to get a little
- Helping to find a mutually agreeable solution
- Stresses maintaining the relationship
- The best way to resolve conflict over important issues.
- Leads to creative solutions.
Cost and Value of Conflict

Value of Conflict

Conflict is constructive when:

- Spawns creativity and innovation
- When goal congruence exists
- Brings important issues to light; may result in issue clarification
- Deepens employee engagement and morale
- Builds cohesiveness – “what can we do for the greatest good of the organization?”
Value of Conflict

Conflict is *destructive* when:

- Diverts energy from more important issues
- Deepens differences in values
- Is divisive or polarizes groups so that cooperation is reduced
- Destroys the morale of people or reinforces poor self-concept
- There is entrenchment

Costs of Workplace Conflict

**Direct Costs**

- Labor
- Overhead
- Litigation
- Replacement
- Workers’ Compensation
- Healthcare
- Security
Costs of Workplace Conflict

Indirect Costs
- Lost productivity
- Lost revenue
- High turnover
- Morale
- Energy and effort managing conflict

Video Clip
Steps for Positive Resolution

When the following conditions are in place, the likelihood of a positive resolution increases:

- Commitment to find a resolution that is mutually beneficial
- Open mindedness - recognition that there is more than one way to look at the issues
- Belief that a solution exists
- Commitment to stay in the communication process
- Trust
- Respect
Techniques for De-escalating Conflict

Verbal
- State the problem and how you feel
- Be complete and honest in your communication
- Use “I” messages; avoid blaming and name calling
  - Say this: I think, I feel, I wonder
  - Stay away from these: Never, always, can’t or won’t
- Ask open-ended questions
- Confirm mutual understanding and agreement
- Follow through (circle back) and check-in

Non-verbal
- Timing (and location) is everything!
- Take a deep breath and try to relax
- Take a time out to collect your thoughts
- Think “win-win”
- Use appropriate body language
- Listen actively
As a Leader, your responsibility is

- Set the right tone for how people communicate with each other.
- Effectively deal with conflict on three levels: self, team and organizational.
- Develop awareness and be sensitive to the needs of others.
- Know when it’s time to get others involved.

Effective Conflict Management

- Prevent escalation - stay calm
- Solve the real problem
- Reframe the issue
- De-personalize the disagreement
- Co-create solutions
- Build and preserve relationships
Respect is contagious

- Everyone has a contribution to make.
- Actively listen more than you talk.
- Respect the other person; be cordial and polite.
- Agree to disagree.
- Valuing each other’s perspective, differences, culture and ways of thinking helps us “get to yes”
Summary

- 5 Conflict styles
- Conflict can be constructive, destructive and expensive if not resolved
- As a leader you help resolve conflict on 3 levels: the conflict you encounter; helping others resolve conflicts and helping the organization;
- De-escalate conflict when possible
- Communication is key; listen more than you talk and remember to respect the other person

References


*Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management* (2010)


*Conflict at Work Practice Guide* – Zark Consultancy (2010)
Thank you!