



Author

Conflict Management Skills

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Whenever choices exist there is potential for conflict. Such conflicts, when handled correctly, can result in effective, creative solutions and interactions. But unfortunately, it is difficult to consistently turn conflicts into opportunities for growth and improvement. When conflicts are inadequately dealt with, the result can be controversy. Controversy creates a sense of emotional distance between people, such as feelings of dislike, aggression, competition, alienation, and disregard.

With hired employees and strangers, we often try and put forth our best behavior. Out of concern for how managers or the farm are perceived, we may error in saying too little when things go wrong. This is especially so during what could be called a “transition period.” Instead of saying things directly, we often try to hint.

But sooner or later this “transition period” behavior gets pushed aside out of necessity. We may find it easier to disregard or ignore problems until they are so large we cannot help but deal with them or address them directly. Sometime after that transition is made, it may become all too easy to start telling the employee or co-worker exactly what has to be done differently. However, even when we think we are telling that person directly if we haven’t practiced good communication and conflict management skills up to that point the person may remain uncertain about how to interpret these comments.

People differ in their understanding of comments or actions of others, as well as their ability to deal with the stress created by a conflict situation. While it is important that we are sensitive to how we affect others, there is much virtue in not taking offense easily ourselves. It does little good, however, to appear impervious while steam builds up within and those around you remain unaware.

When disagreements emerge it is easy to hear without listening. People involved in conflict often recruit others to support their point of view and thus avoid trying to work matters out directly with the other person. Our sense of worth is more delicate than most of us would like to admit. Unresolved conflict often threatens whatever self-worth we may possess. By finding someone who agrees with us, we falsely elevate that self-worth. Our self-worth will be constructed over a firmer foundation when we learn to deal successfully with conflict.

It takes more skill, effort and commitment to face the challenge together with the other person involved in the conflict. Certainly it seems as if it would be easier to fight, withdraw, or give in. Yet in the long run, working through conflicts together will help us live a less stressful and more fulfilling work environment.

We can ease stress, resolve conflicts and increase productivity through effective discussion. Such a discussion entails as much listening as talking. While effective two-way exchanges will happen naturally some of the time, for the most part they need to be carefully planned. There may be some pain--or at least moving out of our comfort zone--involved in

discussing difficult issues, but the rewards are satisfaction and improved relationships.

When faced with conflicts, we tend to review possible alternatives and come up with the best solution given the data at hand. Unwanted options are discarded. Options or alternatives which are particularly challenging are often discarded early on in the process as a natural tendency to move away from alternatives which are outside of our comfort area takes over. While some decisions may take careful consideration, analysis, and even agony, we solve others almost automatically. Our best solution becomes our position or stance in the matter. Our needs, concerns and fears all play a part in coming up with such a position. Misunderstanding and dissent can raise their ugly heads when our solution is not the same as those of others.

Reducing Conflict

Strong principles have contributed greatly to the creative handling of conflicts. First, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood," was introduced by Steven Covey, in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Encourage others to explain their side first; they will be more apt to listen to ours. Individuals who can learn to keep communication lines open and solve conflicts when things go wrong will win.

1. Regularly review job descriptions. Get your employee's input on them. Write down and date job descriptions. Ensure
 - a. Job roles don't conflict
 - b. Clear and concise duties
 - c. No job tasks are duplicated or missing
2. Deliberately build relationships with all subordinates.
 - a. Meet at least once a month alone
 - b. Ask about accomplishments, challenges, and issues
3. Get regular, written status reports and include:
 - a. Accomplishments
 - b. Current issues and needs from management
 - c. Plans for the upcoming period
4. Conduct basic training about:
 - a. Interpersonal communications
 - b. Conflict management
 - c. Delegation
5. Develop procedures for routine tasks and include the employees' input
 - a. Have employees write procedures when possible and appropriate
 - b. Get employees' to review all of the procedures
 - c. Distribute and post procedures
 - d. Train employees about the procedures
6. Regularly hold management meetings to communicate new initiatives and status of current programs.
7. Implement an anonymous suggestion box for employee suggestions.

Putting it all together

If we come right out and tell someone, "I disagree," we are apt to alienate that person. Successful managers are more likely to label their intentions, such as a desire to ask a difficult question or provide a suggestion, and are less prone to label conflict. Problems are likely, however, to increase if we put all our needs aside to focus totally on another person's perspective. The other person may not appreciate your needs, and certainly be unaware of how you prioritize your needs, if you don't inform them of your position and be offended when we introduce them all of a sudden.

Involving a Third Party

Sometimes conflicts in organizational level, personality or self-worth among the participants in a conflict require a third party arbitrator. For instance, one barn supervisor had resorted to bullying and implied threats to get their way. "I would have gladly tried to find a way to help my supervisor achieve their goals," the subordinate explained through tears. "But now I am so sensitized, I am afraid of talking to them."

Telling employees to work out their troubles on their own, grow up, or shake hands and get along may work occasionally, but most of the time the conflict will only be sent underground to resurface later in more destructive ways.

A better approach is to allow employees to meet with a third party, or mediator (which, in some cases, may be a manager or owner of the farm), to assist them in their own resolution of the conflict.

Skills in Conflict

A variety of skills are needed for different levels of conflict intensity and different kinds of relationships. The skills that serve you well in intimate relationships may be inappropriate with transient, unimportant connections; at work; with casual friends; or with distant family. You will need to adapt these seven general communication skills to each situation:

1. **Speak Up**

Someone needs to speak up and say what they want, think, or feel. However obvious this point seems, the expression of conflict often is bogged down because someone is afraid to articulate needs clearly. Difficulty in expressing preferences directly may result in indirect, passive, or aggressive communication. Instead of blaming, switching topics, or avoiding, make sure you address the problem as the issue.

2. **Listen**

Listening is a skill that underlies all productive conflict management. Focus on what the other person is saying, not your rebuttal. Search for what might be right about what you hear instead of what is wrong and let the other know you are doing this. Give some feedback that indicates that the other person has been heard.

3. **Feelings**

In conflict, you will have very strong feelings at times. You will be angry, enraged, joyful, or despondent. Careful, respectful expression of these feelings helps, rather than damages, conflict. Avoid squelching your feelings; just learn to express them clearly in a nondestructive manner.

4. **Rational**

Remaining rational does not mean staying calm, cool, collected or distant. Rationality means keeping in mind that you are trying to solve a problem and that you must remain connected to the other person throughout the interaction. Anything that diverts you from this task hurts conflict management. Summarize and ask questions.

5. **Review**

Ask about points that need clarification, using open-ended questions. Specialize in asking questions for which you do not know the answer.

6. **Give and Take**

Be fair by taking your turn and giving others their turns. No productive resolution comes from a one-sided conversation. You may solve a short-term problem; but in the long term, fairness counts.

7. **Harmful Statements**

Personal attacks create enemies. Harsh criticism drives people out of the interaction. Making the other person wrong means reducing the chance that you will ever make anything right.

Managing a Conflict

It's often in the trying that we find comfort, not in getting the best solution. Steps may help you in finding comfort.

1. Name the conflict, or identify the issue, including what you want that you aren't getting. Consider:
 - a. Writing your thoughts down to come to a conclusion.
 - b. Talking to someone, including asking them to help you summarize the conflict in a few sentences or points.
2. Get perspective by discussing the issue with a friend or a third party by putting it down in writing. Consider:
 - a. How important is this issue?
 - b. Does the issue seem worse because you're tired, angry at something else, etc.?
 - c. What's your role in this issue?
3. Pick at least two alternatives you can do about the conflict.
 - a. Identify at least three courses of action.
 - b. For each course, write at least three pros and cons.
 - c. Select an action - if there is no clear course of action, pick the alternative that will not hurt, or be least hurtful, to yourself and others.
 - d. Briefly discuss that course of action with a friend.

4. Then do something.
 - a. Wait at least a day before you do anything about the conflict. This gives you a cooling off period.
 - b. Then take an action.
 - c. Have in your own mind and communicate a date when you will act again if you see no clear improvement.

Summary

Wherever there are choices to be made, conflicts may provide challenges or opportunities. One difficulty is the possibility that conflicts will result in increased disagreement. Supervisors may have to act as mediators and arbitrators from time to time. The advantage of mediation is maintaining responsibility for problem solving and conflict resolution at the level of those who own the challenge. Selecting an outside mediator often makes sense.