Conflict Management – An Oxymoron of Sorts

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What dictates appropriate behavior in the workplace? The human resource departments do a great job of providing new employees with the tools needed to operate successfully in the organization, but do little to assist with conflict management. How can an organization appropriately integrate new employees into a team environment without establishing rules of organizational behavior? Too often we are faced with conflicts amongst employees that escalate out of control because managers are not equipped to handle these types of situations. Conflict management and negotiation are critical skills all managers should have.

Not to say that all conflict is bad; it is often needed to help people realize that there is no one right way to perform an action. It also motivates employees to perform when co-workers become intolerant of poor performance and decide that confrontation is necessary. Conflict sometimes helps people understand that identifying and dealing with differences can be beneficial.

Conflict becomes a problem when it disrupts productivity, impacts the morale of others not directly involved in the conflict, causes inappropriate behavior, or threatens physical or emotional harm. With the appropriate management intervention early on, conflict can be resolved at the lowest possible level. But because organizations do not consider this type of training important for managers, we are experiencing a rise in workplace conflicts. It makes sense that mangers should be trained to resolve conflict, since oftentimes, they are the root cause of the conflict. To help minimize conflict, organizations must provide the following:

- Establish clear channels of communication. When organizations fail to communicate appropriate workplace behaviors, employees resort to what they know or what worked best for them in the past.

- Let employees know their supervisory chain on the first day of employment, and provide an organizational chart.

- Provide appropriate leadership and periodic reminders of the mission, vision, and strategic goals of the organization. Post this same information throughout the organization; include statements about corporate values and the ethical environment.

- Involve employees in the decision-making process. Of course, this can't be done in all situations, but at least make an effort to explain the reason for the new decision and how it will impact the work environment. To *not* do so encourages the use of the "grapevine" and the "rumor mill."

- Allocate adequate resources to perform critical job functions. Requiring employees to "do more with less" when more is available generates resentment; not necessarily from anger, but from stress.

- Delineate job roles, tasks and responsibilities, and keep job descriptions current. This is important for managers who often don't understand the jobs of their subordinates.

- Avoid teaming employees with strong personality types. The use of personality assessment tools can assist with this process by identifying personality and determining which types work best together.

- Consider the use of teambuilding activities to build relationships and enhance productivity. This training can include interpersonal communication skills and conflict management.

- Afford people the opportunity to grow and develop. Training, perceived opportunities for promotions, lateral moves for development, and cross-training are visible signs of an organization's willingness to invest in employees.

- Resolve workplace issues as quickly as possible. When employees see the same issues continuing in the workplace they become frustrated and eventually verbalize their dissatisfaction.

- Have a written policy explaining how violence in the workplace will not be tolerated. State clearly what workplace violence is, and what is and is not acceptable behavior.

- Reward and recognize good performance. Employees need to know that their contributions are valuable and contribute to organizational goals.

Take some time to evaluate how well your organization applies these recommendations. Implementing these procedures can minimize conflicts in your workplace and cultivate an environment founded on growth.

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