

Countering Conflict

One of the biggest difficulties facing people at work is how to deal with people when we differ with them or when they differ with us. How do we manage dialogue with each other even if we disagree and how do we manage to get to a win-win process?

Unfortunately, we tend to leave situations rather than deal with them. When this happens we become less and less likely to address the issues, either because we believe we are over sensitive, or because we are scared of the outcome. The analogy here is of buying fish. We gone out and bought the fish, not realising that one had fallen off the table and gone onto the floor. The fish under the table is ignored and becomes smelly. If not dealt with the smelly fish becomes even smellier until it smells like it could be a whole shoal of fish. When this happens people may either just want to leave the situation or the smell being so bad that as tension mounts people become more frustrated. We need to deal with the fish when it can easily digested.

Whilst conflict does not necessarily mean being angry, the way we think about anger will have an affect on the way we experience conflict situations. If anger is viewed as something to be avoided, is negative, means we don't care, needs to be met with anger etc. then this will influence how we view conflict and whether or not we avoid it, become aggressive, or are assertive.

There are many schools of thought about the causes of anger, aggression and violence. Some say it is instinctive and others say it is learned. Whichever theory is favoured these feelings

and actions need to be dealt with by us all at different times. How we respond today will depend on how we were encouraged to respond in childhood in our family of origin, our neighbourhood and in our culture. For example, shyness and tenderness are often approved of in women, anger is not. Yet in many situations, anger or indignation is the most authentic response.

Whether male or female, if we have been taught to repress anger then we can internalise these feelings. Internalised anger brings on depression and self-deprecation.

Anger involves the mind, body and the behavioural habits that we have developed due our life experiences. In order to resolve anger we need to think about our feelings, feel about our thoughts and decide what action to take. For example, emotional release is insufficient as it is only half the problem. To shout at someone may be helpful, but rarely is if it does nothing about the person who we feel has wronged us. Undertaking relaxation deep breathing is unlikely to be of assistance on its own if the person who is bothering us still has to be faced.

Successful anger management deals with *thoughts* - the attitudes, perceptions and interpretations that generate anger; the body - teaching relaxation and cooling-off techniques to help us calm down; and behaviour - teaching new skills for dealing with the situation.

Often anger is the cover for other feelings and thoughts which we find difficult to express: *I'm hurt. I'm worried. I don't know how to talk about my feelings. I feel disempowered, I feel trodden on, I don't know how to get my way. No one listens to me. I can't forgive them.*



Mountain Associates



Mountain Associates

We rarely consider conflict and anger as creative but they can be. Situations where conflict occurs need to be dealt with. However, anger is not a concrete phenomenon and therefore to express it as such creates the myth that everyone and anyone would become angry at the same thing, or the same situation. This is not the case. We need to work out what triggers our own angry feelings and whether we want to change this, or whether we are happy with the way we express, or repress, these feelings.

In effective anger management both the individual, and the relationship with others, benefit. The spontaneous outpouring of angry feelings may help an individual in the short-term but may not resolve the problem. To think twice about anger is to enhance the long-term benefit of the relationship and is more likely to problem solve.

If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow. (Fortune Cookie)

Culture plays a part in how conflict is managed. For example the white British culture is often portrayed as having a “stiff upper lip” mentality, holding on to their angry feelings. Other cultures, such as the Greek culture tend to be more expressive of their feelings.

Group conflict may occur when individuals experience a threat to safe predictable situations. Conflict also occurs when groups need to problem solve but the technical solutions are given precedence over process. Where the solution is technically good, but the group are not committed this could lead to a poor outcome. All group members need an eye to the process and need to stay in touch with how they feel about agreements and decisions.

Conflict is between groups and departments may have come about because their goals are incompatible. For example, stock control may not want so much capital lying around in stock, whilst maintenance may need surplus stock to ensure sufficient spares for machinery. Another goal which both can share may be necessary.

Competition between groups and departments may be healthy or unhealthy. This will depend upon the situation and the levels of competition. It will also depend upon the levels of dependency they have with each other.

Problem solving will depend upon what each party has to gain from the process. There are many different types of problem solving and these will depend upon the levels of trust each party has of the other.

Conflict may be present when the following are occurring:

- Absenteeism
- Psychosomatic problems
- Sabotage
- Lack of loyalty
- Low motivation
- Human error
- Burn out
- Low productivity
- Lack of commitment
- Aggression and violence

Kohlreiser G (2004) Hostage at the Table

Resolution

- Develop a goal or goals which all parties find acceptable. Share perceptions of each group and then each group withdraws to explore the discrepancies between their perceptions and look at how these may have come about. This is high risk and needs careful facilitation.
- Explore roles and relationships and the reciprocal demands and expectations on each and the possible conflict areas. Then move to a resolution of these conflict areas once they have been fully explored.
- Leaders meet and develop liaison and challenge their own perceptions. Group members can also be exchanged so that stereotyping is broken down and greater understanding develops.

Stages of Negotiation:

1. Contract - agree about when and where to discuss the issue/s
2. Create relationship, look at what is important in the relationship
3. Separate Person from Problem
4. Identify Needs and Wants of Self
5. Identify Needs and Wants of Other
6. Dialogue – ensure you hear each other and reflect back what has been heard – before responding
7. Create a goal
8. Options and Proposals
9. Mutual Gain
10. Contract for actions
11. Relationship Continues or Ends on a Positive Note

Effective Communication

If we anticipate that someone will threaten us, or they have actually threatened us, then our behaviour will become defensive. In the work place any defensive behaviour takes up energy and detracts from the task in hand. Inevitably production will be hampered if we are giving mental time to how we might win, dominate, impress, avoid someone finding out something, or if we give substantial time to how we might avoid being attacked.

Energy taken up with winning, impressing etc. will affect the giving and receiving of messages, and instructions may go haywire. If our paranoid fantasies, or the actual difficult relationship is not dealt with, we are likely to become more and more defensive, this in turn, is likely to lead to increased difficulties in communication.

We need to create supportive climates to work in rather than defensive one. When it looks like people are evaluating or judging us we are likely to go on guard. We can “go on our guard” because of two different sources – internal and external. If people talk up or down to us (external) or if we believe we are better or worse than other and act accordingly (internal).

Communication is effected by the tone and inflection of our voice, the speed we say it and the audibility of it. In Transactional Analysis (TA) terms the life position and the mode from which we function, will also affect how we say something.

Recognition also affects communication. At work it is important that we give and receive strokes (recognition) at all



Mountain Associates

levels of the workforce – to our colleagues at our own level and to those at different levels in the hierarchy. It is to be remembered that the higher the management level the fewer people there are to give us recognition.

There are cultural expectations in giving and receiving strokes. When there is a mismatch in expectations we can be offended. For example, if it is natural and usual for us to give recognition to a colleague for a job well done then we are likely to be surprised and perhaps offended, if they don't respond with a similar recognition when we do something similar.

Childhood playgroups are where we learn and rehearse our conversational style. This will affect how we are later as adults. The skill required for managers, consultants, etc. is to become aware of the linguistic differences for men and women as well as for different cultures. In this way those who have something to say will be heard, even if they say it in a way that does not fit with the cultural norm of the work place.

Responses to difference

Managing a diverse work force is a difficult task because of the differences we *believe* exist. These beliefs develop into stereotyping behaviours that are more pervasive than prejudice because they set standards by which people are judged. These different frames of reference were termed “assumptive worlds” by Frank (1974, *Persuasion and Healing*). In an attempt to create order and to make sense of the world we make assumptions.

When observations are made about other groups the similarities between that group are exaggerated and the differences ignored. (“*They are all the same anyway*”). Furthermore we exaggerate the differences between different groups and minimise the similarities.

We need to find the space where we can meet each other.

Scott Peck (1987) talks about getting to the stage of community through dropping our prejudices and assumptions and seeing who is really in front of us. Only then can we be conflict resolving rather than conflict avoiding as we are at the pseudo-community stage. His stages are: Pseudo-community, Chaos, Emptiness, Community.

Whilst Berne E. (1972), noted that “in order to say Hello you first get rid of all the trash which has accumulated in your head ever since you came home from the maternity ward, and then you recognize that this particular Hello will never happen again”.

Power and its Relationship to Conflict

If we are out of touch with a sense of our own internal source of power we may attempt to obtain this through power *over*, rather than power *with*, others.

If we believe we are powerless we are likely to use the status granted to us by the organisation, or give our power away. In the former situation we can create conflict and/or resentment. With the latter situation we are likely to become resentful and this will affect our levels of positive energy for work. It is therefore likely that our productivity will reduce.



Mountain Associates

In terms of leadership some of us might use coercion to ensure compliance. When this happens others are likely to mess up in some way as they will not feel loyal to the team, department or organisation.

Alternatively some people use their status to get the workforce to do what they want. Again this denies others ability to think for themselves and have something to offer the organisation. This is likely to lead to resentment and conflict.

It is only when we use other types of power – support, knowledge coupled with interpersonal competence that we encourage a cooperative workforce.



Mountain Associates