

When Co-workers Clash

Workshop training can prepare professionals to handle conflict—like professionals.

By KAREN WATKINS

“Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they discuss it freely.”
—Lord Macaulay, 1830

Belief in the benefits of conflict still exists. Indeed, some people believe conflict to be not just okay, but creative. Still, the common attitude toward confrontation is negative: people dislike it, avoid it, and when involved in it, seek to stop it.

This attitude is supported perhaps most strongly in business environments. Organizational experiences lead employees to believe that those who confront get fired; that positive information flows up the organization, negative down; that disagreeing with the boss is a sign of disloyalty; and that conflict in a work group is a sign of dysfunction or poor management. These

not exclusively mean stamping out sparks. Certain situations call for escalating conflict—for bringing subdued opposition out into the open.

One strategy for escalating conflict is to bring opposing parties together and confront the behavior the manager has seen. When employees display dissension through gossip, snide remarks, or other forms of unprofessional behavior, the manager should address the behavior directly, in the presence of all parties involved.

Another conflict escalation strategy is to speak directly to the root issue, if known. If the issue is not known, the manager should probe for it. Oblique references to problems lead to tangential solutions at best.

For times too hot

Managers may find it tougher to de-escalate conflict when necessary. Trainers can help them develop skill in cooling down explosive situations, too.

This behavioral training should start with teaching managers to respond differently to conflict than expected, or to respond “inappropriately.” Conversation should be presented as an equation. Since a person often matches the feeling he or she receives from the other person’s comment, a conversation that begins with a negative statement will end up negative and will look like this: $-1 + -1 = -2$. Instead of allowing that to happen, managers should respond to negative statements with positive ones ($-1 + 1 = 0$): “This is the dumbest workshop I’ve ever attended” can be answered with “You really seem upset. I would like to help. Maybe we could discuss this at the break.”

When the conflict situation is one in which the manager can agree with the opposing party ($-1 + 1 = 0$), a statement such as “I really can’t see why you’re throwing money into the old supervisory training program when we desperately need money for a new productivity improvement program” can be answered with “I agree that we need additional funds to develop the new productivity program. Unfortunately, the old supervisory program is what we can now afford.”

Another situation may call for no response or only a neutral comment ($-1 \times 0 = 0$): “I am fed up with these stupid forms” can be answered with “I see.” Neutralizing angry remarks does not, by itself, lead to conflict resolution, but it sets the stage for rational discussion.

Another de-escalation strategy to teach managers is to give an angry person an ac-

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norms repress the natural evolution of skill in confronting differences, leaving employees feeling out of control when conflicts flare up.

Trainers can help managers develop skill in managing conflict—in gaining sufficient control over interpersonal confrontations to discuss them rationally and promote problem solving. Trainers first should point out that conflict management does

Trainers should also encourage managers to develop an open and trusting climate for frequent, healthy airing of differences. Managers can take a number of steps to create this type of climate. For example, *In Search of Excellence* authors Peters and Waterman emphasize “management by walking around.” Seeing people on *their* turf helps equalize roles and reduce barriers to trust. Spending time getting to know people through small talk is an effective way of letting people know they’re accepted as individuals with differences of opinion. Enthusiastic searching for different viewpoints on key decisions create a healthy business environment.

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tion outlet. Perhaps the best use of this strategy is to ask the person to express his or her position in writing. To write, a person must calm down enough to gather thoughts together. Writing is a reflective, rational activity; it produces more articulate, reasonable, evidence-supported

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statements than does an impassioned oral argument. As a result of writing out his or her position, the angry person may convince the other party to compromise.

One other strategy that can help managers de-escalate conflict is to appeal to higher values or beliefs the conflicting parties have in common. For example, a manager might say, "Look, we may not agree on who should head the new career development program, but I know you both are as concerned as I am that this organization needs to plan more consciously for employee development. Let's work together to build the best program we can, and in the process, let's keep discussing the qualifications we need in a program director."

Training delivery

Three workshop activities can be used to develop skill in managing interpersonal conflict: case analysis, role reversal, and narrative history.

For case analysis, the trainer interviews two or three people in the organization to identify current conflict situations. The trainer turns these into generic cases within the same industry, so the workshop participants will, in effect, work on real organizational problems. In the workshop, the trainer instructs the participants to take these successive steps:

- Clarify the problem between the two parties in the case.
- Brainstorm issues from the perspective of each party.
- Generate at least three ways to resolve the problem, addressing issues from each party.
- Determine resources needed for an effective resolution, and identify the first steps toward resolution.
- Specify the first steps each party must take.

For role reversal, the trainer asks a

workshop participant (Person A) to turn to another participant (Person B) and describe a conflict Person A is currently struggling with (without telling names or personality characteristics). Then Person B assumes the role of Person A, while Person A portrays his or her conflicting party (Person C). Person B then asks Person A the following:

- What are the advantages of this position to C?
- What are the disadvantages to C?
- As C, what do you really like about your role in this conflict?
- What do you dislike?
- In this situation, what do you really want?

With a little pushing by the trainer to get past the first glib responses, participants can approach the personal issues at a level conducive to problem solving.

This activity is adapted from the technique of Adam Blatner, who believes that organizational conflicts can be reduced greatly when people learn to assume conflicting parties' roles.

The last activity, narrative history, uses Kurt Lewin's model for understanding behavior. The trainer asks workshop participants to chronicle a conflict they have been involved in by identifying critical events. For each event, participants describe the following:

- Antecedents—what triggered or led to the event;
- Behavior—what exactly was said and done;
- Consequences—what resulted from this behavior;
- Context—who was involved, when (time of day, week, month, year), and where.

This activity works best when participants chronicle more than one conflict. Participants can identify patterns, and once they do so, can begin to break the patterns.

Throughout the workshop, the trainer should emphasize that a person's image of conflict resolution greatly affects his or her potential for success. An image of conflict resolution as a healing ritual—as a series of positive steps—holds the most potential for effective conflict management.



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