

Resolving Workplace Conflicts

There is much debate in books and on training courses about the 'positive effects' of conflict in the workplace. Our experience in Tandem Consulting has been that, for most people, there are few positive benefits around conflict while it is happening. Conflict involves emotional pain, discomfort and stress. It siphons off time and energy from personal and professional priorities. And many people bring their worries home with them, disrupting family life. This is as true for senior executives as much as junior employees. Individual and organisational performance suffers when people are consumed emotionally, mentally and behaviourally by conflicts. The following scenario (based on a real case) is not untypical of many workplaces.



Early in their working relationship there were stresses and strains between Mary and Joe. It wasn't long before they were arguing at meetings. If Joe said 'black' then Mary said 'white'. Everyone said it was a 'personality clash' and their manager and colleagues 'worked around it'. Mary and Joe spoke to each other as little as possible and tried to confine communications to emails and to working through colleagues. Some people took sides for and against Mary or Joe. That affected relationships at work and on social occasions. People 'sat together' in the canteen, at staff meetings and in the pub. People started to say that the workplace had become very 'cliquish' and that it wasn't as comfortable to work there as it had once been. New people were warned to be careful who they were talking to in case they offended one 'side' or the other. Implementing changes in this work area became very difficult. Within the wider organisation, this group developed a reputation for being 'difficult' – much to the annoyance of those who worked there.

It usually takes a crisis to prompt anything to be done in situations like this. This might take a number of forms: a manager leaving because of the conflict, staff seeking transfers out of the unit, accusations and counter-accusations of bullying and harassment, senior management considering the breakup of the unit, or staff going to their union to do something about the situation. While it is easier said than done, it makes sense to tackle situations like this before they reach crisis point. Sometimes, that's already too late; you can't put the toothpaste back in the tube!

What Are the Symptoms or Signs of Serious Conflict?

Conflict appears in many guises, sometimes not outwardly looking like conflict at all. For example, organisations and groups may be peaceful and calm because no one is willing to speak up about differences. However, some of the more common symptoms of workplace conflict are listed below.

SIGNS OF WORKPLACE CONFLICT

Where there is ongoing conflict that is not being handled properly the likelihood is that some of the following will be found:

- Frequent disagreements on work-related issues/low consensus
- Disagreements routinely 'swept under the carpet'
- Ongoing tension between leaders and dominant individuals
- Cliques, people not talking to each other and people talking behind each other's backs
- A 'blame culture'
- High levels of sickness leave and absenteeism
- Bullying and harassment
- Low morale and motivation
- Unreasonable use of managerial authority/unreasonable challenging of this
- Rude and aggressive behaviour
- People leaving or seeking transfers – high unit turnover
- Anger and frustration and constant complaining
- Failed projects, poor unit or team performance, and resistance to change.

Some of these behaviours such as bullying, rudeness and aggression represent unacceptable behaviours that need to be addressed in any circumstances. Others, such as sick leave, complaints, and frequent challenging of managerial authority may be cries for help.

Methods for Resolving Conflicts

Most organisations have routine methods for handling certain types of conflicts such as complaints of bullying and harassment. Many conflicts can be resolved without going outside the organisation. That's clearly the most desirable approach. However, when conflicts are intense and are causing personal and organisational damage, it can be useful – indeed sometimes essential – to bring in external help.

The early involvement of of an independent, external consultant can sometimes be the difference between prolonged festering and early resolution. In Tandem Consulting we provide a range of services including Independent investigation and Reporting, Conflict Analysis and Feedback, Group Facilitation, and Mediation.

A key starting point is to understand the difficulty and choose the most appropriate route forward. For example, many bullying and harassment complaints are handled through lengthy and expensive investigations when early mediation might be more effective and less costly.



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