Work Team Conflict Resolution

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Abstract*: As organizations continue to restructure to work teams, the need for training in conflict resolution will grow. Conflict arises from differences. When individuals come together in teams, their differences in terms of power, values, and attitudes contribute to the creation of conflict. To avoid the negative consequences that can result from disagreements, most methods of resolving conflict stress the importance of dealing with disputes quickly and openly. Conflict is not necessarily destructive; however, when managed properly, conflict can result in benefits for a team. This article takes a look at some established steps that will assist students to effectively deal with work teams in the class room and with group members having different view points. These simple guidelines will make the difference between failure and success.*

Work Teams

Over the past decade, almost all colleges and major corporations have implemented the work team system of management. The major reason for this shift is that a team has more diversity of knowledge, ideas, and experience than any one individual. This diversity has helped to increase productivity and reduce cost; however, this diversity also produces conflict. Varney (1989) reports that conflict remained the number-one problem for most of the teams operating within a large company even after repeated training sessions on conflict resolution and learning how to minimize the negative impact on team members. Varney's research illustrated that mangers and other leaders are not giving conflict resolution enough attention. It is critical that all team members possess conflict resolution skills.

Conflict is an every day part of life and arises from individual differences. When individuals work in teams, differences in power, values, attitudes, and social factors all contribute to conflict. Conflict can arise from numerous sources within a team setting and generally falls into three categories: communication factors, structural factors and personal factors (Varney, 1989). Communication factors include poor listening skills, insufficient sharing of information, differences in interpretation and perception, and nonverbal cues being ignored or missed. Structural disagreements include the size of the organization, turnover rate, levels of participation, reward systems, and levels of interdependence among employees. Personal factors include bigotry, racism, and shyness. These three barriers to communication are among the most important factors and can be a major source of misunderstanding.

Conflict in work teams is not necessarily destructive. Depending on the situation, the conflict may be seen as negative or positive. Conflict can lead to new ideas and approaches to organizational processes and increased interest in dealing with problems. Conflict can be considered positive as it facilitates the surfacing of important issues and provides opportunities for people to develop their communication and interpersonal skills. However, conflict becomes negative when it is escalates to the point where people begin to feel defeated, and a combative climate of distrust and suspicion develops (Bowditch & Buono, 1997). Nelson (1995) cautions that negative conflict can destroy a team quickly, and often arises from poor planning. He suggests the following list of high potential areas from which negative conflict issues commonly arise:

1. Administrative Procedures: If the team lacks good groundwork for what they are doing, its members will not be able to coordinate their work.
2. People Resources: If the team does not have enough resources to do the job, it is inevitable that some members will carry too heavy of a load. Resentment, often unexpressed, may build; therefore, it is crucial that team leaders ensure adequate resources.
3. Cost overruns: Often inevitable, cost overruns become a problem when proper measures are not taken. The entire team should be aware, early on, when cost becomes a problem so additional funding can be sought by the team. Therefore, the problem can be resolved before it grows into a problem for management.
4. Schedules: The schedule is highly consequential to the team's project and should be highly visible. All members should be willing to work together to help each other meet their deadlines.
5. Responsibilities: Each team member must know their assigned areas and be accountable for them.
6. Wish Lists: Team members must stick to the project at hand and avoid being sidetracked into trying to fit other things into their schedules. Wait and do the other things you would like to do after successful completion of the original project (Nelson, 1995).

Team members can and should attempt to keep negative conflict from occurring. Being aware of the potential for negative conflict and taking the necessary steps to ensure good planning will help the situation. When negative conflict does occur, there are five accepted methods for handling it: Direct Approach, Bargaining, Enforcement, Retreat, and De-emphasis (Nelson, 1995). Each can be used effectively in different circumstances.

1. Direct Approach: This may be the best approach of all. It concentrates on the leader confronting the issue head-on. Though conflict is uncomfortable to deal with, it is best to look at issues objectively and to face them as they are. If criticism is used, it must be constructive to the recipients. Because issues are brought to the surface and dealt with, this approach counts on the techniques of problem-solving and normally leaves everyone with a sense of resolution.
2. Bargaining: This is an excellent technique when both parties have ideas on a solution but yet cannot find common ground. Often a third party, such as a team leader, is needed to help find the compromise. Compromise involves give and take on both sides, and usually ends up with both walking away equally dissatisfied.
3. Enforcement of Team Rules: Avoid using this method if possible because hard feelings often develop toward the leader and the team. This technique is only used when it is obvious that a team member does not want to be a team player and refuses to work with the rest of the group. If enforcement has to be used on an individual, it may be best for that person to find another team.
4. Retreat: Only use this method when the problem isn't real to begin with. By simply avoiding it or working around it, a leader can often delay long enough for the individual to cool off. When used in the right environment by an experienced leader, this technique can help to prevent minor incidents that are the result of someone having a bad day from becoming real problems that should never have occurred.
5. De-emphasis: This is a form of bargaining where the emphasis is on the areas of agreement. When parties realize that there are areas in which they agree, they can often begin to move in a new direction (Nelson, 1995).

Team Resolution Process

When conflict occurs in teams, Rayeski and Bryant (1994) recommend using the Team Resolution Process. The process states that a conflict should first be handled on an informal basis between the involved team members; this allows time for resolution or self-correction to occur within the team. If the conflict remains unsettled, a mediator can be brought in to help resolve the situation. The next step would be to openly discuss the dispute in a team meeting. Finally, if a resolution is still not achieved, a formal discipline process needs to occur with the team.

Negotiation

Although there are common patterns, there is no one best way to deal with conflict. Disputes arise for different reasons and every team is unique. Varney (1989) proposes that negotiation is the most effective response to conflict when both parties involved stand to gain something. Each individual has some power and interdependency. Negotiation offers flexibility and viability where as other responses such as Avoidance, Confrontation, and Diffusion may lack. The process of negotiation involves listening to both sides, seeking out common areas of interest and agreement, and building on them so that individuals can understand each other's points of view.

    For individuals to work effectively in teams, they must be able to clearly communicate their ideas, listen, and be willing to disagree. Although it may be difficult, learning to appreciate each other's differences reflects a team's ability to manage conflict. When conflict occurs, one should not turn their back and hope it will go away. Instead, one must learn to tolerate and even welcome it. Well-managed conflict can be the source of change and innovation. As more and more organizations attempt to make the difficult transition to teams, they must develop and provide conflict management training programs for their employees.

References

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