

Resolve Differences

By

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Resolving conflict doesn't come easily to too many people. Most of us want harmonious relationships and smooth interpersonal interactions. However, we know that disagreements and conflicts are part of any dynamic organization. They arise because people care about their jobs and want to produce good results. Conflict is not always negative, however. Sometimes it should be encouraged when discussion and debate can generate creative, innovative approaches to issues or decisions. Conflict is beneficial when the focus is on finding the best solution. However, conflict is unproductive when it fails to produce mutually satisfying solutions or when it becomes personal in nature. When you are involved in a conflict yourself, consider these ideas:

- Depersonalize the conflict. Catch yourself when you begin to fall into the trap of believing that the other person is deliberately trying to make a situation difficult.
- At the beginning of resolving differences or conflict, clearly state your desire to find a solution that will work for all involved.
- Build on areas of agreement before you address areas of difference.
- Remember to listen first and talk second. Ask open-ended questions to draw others out and to encourage them to talk about the conflict.
- Try to arrive at a common goal around which everyone involved can focus, and agree to work through areas of disagreement. In other words, don't agree to an outcome that you will not support. Surface reservations that you have and talk with the other person until you can agree on a course of action.
- Dig for understanding without implying criticism.
- Focus on common ground issues and interests of both sides. Find a "win" for all affected parties and avoid entrenched positions.
- Identify specific behaviors in concrete terms and explain the tangible outcomes they have, so that the other person can more easily appreciate the nature of the difficulty.
- Rely on facts instead of judgments or inferences to help you avoid giving feedback that becomes personal.
- Have a goal in mind, a purpose for the meeting or discussion. Remember to put it in one sentence that attacks the problem, not the person. Secondary issues can divert or confuse

matters. However, when you concentrate on accomplishing tasks and the required behaviors for getting the job done, you won't be distracted. Ask yourself, "What is my goal in saying this?" Focus your attention on achieving that primary goal and forget the personal agendas. Keep the outcome in mind. Do you want the person to get angry, or do you want him to start fixing the problem? Maintaining a helpful attitude will keep the other person comfortable and motivated to work with you to solve the problem.

Sometimes the boss is not directly involved in the conflict. Instead, one or more of his or her direct reports are experiencing some problems. When this happens, the first rule is to stay out of it, if you can. Jumping in to fix things may work in the short term, but in the long term, you won't have created anything better. When one of the people involved approaches you and vents, the first thing you can try is to listen empathically. Then, when the direct report finishes explaining the situation, you can ask simply, "What would you like me to do with this information?" Usually the answer will be "Nothing." However, if it isn't, weigh carefully whether you should step in. Usually, there should only be two people involved in the conflict. Any more, and things get really ugly and complicated. Encourage the people to resolve things themselves.

However, sometimes you just can't stay out of a disagreement. When productivity starts to suffer or morale is compromised, something has to be done sooner rather than later. If both of the people involved agree that they can't work things out between themselves, the boss needs to get involved.

A beginning strategy is to have both people meet with you to discuss the plan for resolving their differences. But instead of hashing things out right then, invite the participants to fill out some pre-work. This will help you gather the information that will be essential to getting to the core of the trouble. One way to gather this information is to ask each person involved in the disagreement to answer these questions before the actual meeting occurs:

1. What do you consider to be the main barriers to objective and constructive candor as you prepare for this meeting?
2. How can these barriers be eliminated or lowered?
3. What other problems must be resolved before you begin to tackle this problem?
4. Describe the overall nature of your present on-the-job relationship with the other person. How productive is it?

5. How would you describe what an ideal working relationship would be?
6. What have *you* done to cause the current conflict?
7. What resolution have you attempted?
8. What has the *other person* done to contribute to the current conflict?
9. What attempts has he or she made at resolution?
10. What major obstacles stand in the way of making this relationship ideal? (Be candid and objective.)
 - What obstacles do *you* introduce?
 - What obstacles does the *other person* introduce?
11. What can be done to eliminate these barriers?
12. What other *factors* or *people* inhibit the relationship being ideal?
13. What benefits would accrue if the relationship were improved?
 - Benefits to you
 - Benefits to other person
 - Benefits to organization
14. What adverse consequences might ensue if the relationship is not improved?
 - Consequences to you
 - Consequences to other person
 - Consequences to organization
15. What can be done to improve the relationship so that the benefits are realized and the adverse consequences averted?
 - What can *you* do?
 - What can the *other* person do?
 - What can others do?

After the participants have answered the above questions independently of each other, they will be ready to meet with each other discuss their answers. Let them try to do it alone to see if they can. If they can't, have another meeting with you there.

This can be a slow painstaking process, but it works. When each person is taking a turn reading answers to the other and then discussing the answers, volatile outbursts are unlikely. This technique requires time and patience, but it tends to be more successful than the “bandaid” approach.

Conclusion

Effective communication is at the heart of all human activity. Bosses who excel in it take great strides in developing their people and keeping the stars in the organization. Increasingly, an organization’s competitive advantage depends on people, especially on creative, innovative people. Successful organizations must develop, sustain, and market high levels of innovation throughout their infrastructures if they want to maintain their industry leadership. To encourage the pace of this sort of initiative, leaders can no longer rely on a few key individuals to develop creative solutions. Instead, bosses who want to attract, retain, and develop a pool of talented thinkers must know ways to encourage each person’s contributions. Effective communication is that way.

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