II. Communicating Effectively

Exercise: Building Common Ground

When individuals in the workplace are in disagreement or conflict about an issue, one response is for a manager to focus on the areas of difference. With this focus, one of two general approaches to a resolution might be taken: have each person try to “see the other side”; or, have each person try to refute (or support) a specific perspective. Although there are circumstances in which one of these two approaches may make the most sense, when one person ‘wins’ and another ‘loses’, the resolution may not be ideal or long-lasting.

It can be more effective (and often easier) to focus on identifying and building areas of common ground between people in conflict. Help them focus on looking forward to a solution and the future, rather than continuing to explore the problem and the past or present. By focusing a discussion on what needs to change in the future and what each individual will do differently, each becomes an active participant in the resolution of the conflict. More importantly, each can maintain a sense of dignity about the outcome rather than one of them feeling like the loser. This can help strengthen relationships, and is intended to leave all parties feeling that their particular perspectives and opinions were recognized.

Think about a situation in which you had to address a conflict between two workers. Describe the situation and the points of disagreement:

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____________________________________________________________________________

Think about all the possible areas of common ground between the two perspectives/opinions:

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____________________________________________________________________________

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Think about what specifically needed to change (in terms of each person’s behaviour and language) in order for each to work together in a professional and respectful manner:

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____________________________________________________________________________

In hindsight, do you think highlighting any of these areas of common ground or behavioural change could have helped the situation? If so, how?

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The next time you are trying to resolve a conflict in which one or more worker is emotionally distressed, try speaking to each individually about what they need to move forward. Use this as a basis for finding common ground and for creating a resolution where all parties feel respected.