Resolving Conflict with a Needs-Based Approach

Managers hold a range of diverse responsibilities (part of what makes the job so challenging!), including creating a respectful and psychologically safe work environment. This includes stepping in to help improve situations when workers find themselves in strained working relationships. Proactively addressing conflict between and among workers can improve the cohesiveness of your team, enhance workers’ morale, and ultimately increase productivity.

Resolving conflict between two (or more) workers can be challenging for a number of reasons. It can put you in the awkward position of feeling like a referee or mediator. It may be hard to remain neutral or objective given your past experiences with different workers. You may be unfairly accused of taking sides. You may feel that it is a no-win situation, given that one person will seemingly always end up being unhappy.

Certainly, there are always workplace situations with clear “right” and “wrong” sides, in which one worker’s desired outcome or request is undoubtedly justified. In these cases, it is your job as a manager to make a unilateral decision while still responding in a way that seeks to preserve the dignity of all parties. Most conflict situations, however, are not so clear-cut.

A work organization is just like any social organization—there are collective goals but also individual needs and motivations. Conflict situations can arise when workers’ feel that their core work-specific needs (e.g., respect, fairness, recognition, safety) are being violated or not being met.

A strategy that can be effective for resolving conflict between workers, especially where one or more is emotionally distressed, is to take what is referred to as a “needs-based” approach. This approach emphasizes cooperation, rather than competition. It focuses on trying to meet all sides’ needs in some way. It also involves an assumption that conflict usually arises because they have been unable to advocate more effectively for their work-specific needs to be met and that meeting those needs can go a long way in helping to resolve the issue.

Some of the types of workplace conflicts relate to the following (examples of relevant work-specific needs appear in parentheses):
- disagreements over workload (fairness, equity)
- conflict over ownership of or recognition for projects or tasks (acknowledgement, recognition, appreciation, respect)
- personality differences, including embarrassment or hurt due to gossip or teasing (acceptance, closeness, community)
- dissatisfaction concerning job responsibilities (autonomy, creativity)

One of the most immediate needs any worker in a conflict has is to safely express their perspectives. When faced with conflict between workers, the common approach of bringing all parties to the conflict together may not be the most effective strategy if emotions are running high, or if one or more of the parties is experiencing emotional distress (including depression or anxiety-related disorders). The
standard conflict dispute approach may make the workers feel as though they are unnaturally forced to resolve the conflict, just like schoolchildren might be made to shake hands after a skirmish. Workers simply perceive too much pressure to give in or else risk appearing difficult or being accused of not acting like a “team player.” The end result in these situations may be a temporary truce, but not a clear resolution of the issues.

Instead of initially bringing the parties together, it can be effective to use a method promoted by Mary Ann Baynton that she refers to as “shuttle diplomacy” (a term she borrowed from international relations). The process involves the manager (or another trusted third party) meeting with the workers individually, providing each with a secure and private opportunity to voice their needs and concerns and to discuss possible solutions to the conflict. This approach has the critical benefit of recognizing that when one party to a conflict is particularly vulnerable to emotional distress, the playing field of any conflict mediation cannot be considered level. It provides a sense of being heard and respected, even when the person is partially or primarily to blame for the conflict. It helps to focus each participant on a solution, rather than rehashing the problem or disputing the facts. It can also avoid the possibility of a hostile escalation of the situation with disrespectful behaviour such as name-calling, yelling or swearing. It can help to reduce the feelings of shame or blame that often result in the need to justify or defend their positions. By developing a solution that each person can feel good about, it increases the chances of sustainability and long-term commitment to success. When one person ‘wins’ and the other ‘loses’ or worse, when both feel they have ‘lost’ or have been forced to unfairly compromise, the chance for sustainability is usually low.

The shuttle diplomacy technique is particularly appropriate for use by managers who have good interpersonal instincts and understand needs-based problem-solving. During the separate meetings with the individual workers, it can be very useful to take the following steps:

- Have each worker separately identify what they need to resolve the conflict. Keep the conversation focused on solutions by refocusing each time it goes back into a discussion about the problem. Questions such as the following may help: “What would make that better?”; “What specifically needs to change?”; “What do you need to see in terms of behaviour or language for you to feel that this has been resolved?”

- Ensure that each person has an opportunity to fully verbalize their solution, while you manage expectations and coach them where the requests may be unreasonable or not feasible. Ask each worker why they are making the request: this question is key as it can help identify both for you and the other worker the rationale for the request. This can often help workers understand each others’ positions (as transmitted through the manager). You may also want to refer to the information handout Dealing with Unreasonable Requests.

- Try to identify (and verbalize) the work-specific need that seems to be at stake for each party.

- Remember that we cannot change personalities, but we can ask for specific behaviours or interactions to change (i.e. we cannot ask a co-worker to become happier, but we can ask that they refrain from specific negative comments directed at or about another co-worker. We would have to also consider an option if there is a legitimate complaint to be made, such as directing those negative comments directly to a supervisor.)
- Once each worker has agreed on what they need to move forward in this situation, ask him or her to identify what they will commit to doing differently to help this solution remain successful. This personal commitment is often an important component of a sustainable resolution.

- When all of these points have been covered, ask each party to help develop a plan to measure success, as well as a plan to deal with future issues that may arise. This gives a clear path forward in terms of follow up.

- Once you have brokered an agreement that all parties can feel reasonably good about, it is time to bring them together to go over the plan. The point here is that there is no need to justify or defend positions, the plan is intended to be one that both can feel satisfied with and each party can walk away with self-esteem intact.

You may need to emphasize that some of the animosity in a conflict situation may be due to misunderstandings about each workers’ perspective. Use language that encourages positive thinking (e.g., “you are both valuable members of the team”). Remember that even when workers are at odds on an issue, they likely both share similar needs and wants (e.g., for respect, autonomy, fairness).

Understanding each worker’s position, and working toward a solution that considers both sides’ needs, can help lead to the most amicable outcomes. With their privacy and dignity intact, and their individual needs accounted for using the shuttle diplomacy, needs-based approach, the workers may be much more likely to accept and embrace a solution, as compared to the resistance they may exhibit if they feel a solution is being imposed on them in a process that feels humiliating or forced. This can go a long way toward fostering a work environment that is safe, welcoming, and cohesive for everyone.

You may find the exercise handout Understanding Basic Human Needs helpful.