Why Dealing with Conflict is Difficult

If you find dealing with conflict in the workplace one of the most challenging aspects of your job, you are not alone. Many managers report that their stress levels increase when they have to deal with workplace conflict. This includes direct conflict with another individual, as well as managing or mediating conflict between workers.

There are a number of reasons workplace conflict can be so challenging.

1. **We are Social Beings**
   
   We have a tendency to build alliances and to want to belong in a group. From a biological point of view, this benefit our survival. Being in a group and taking on functional roles (e.g., “resource-gatherer”, “bread-winner”, “caregiver”, “communicator”) may help ensure our safety and well-being. It is natural for people to fear disapproval, because it can jeopardize our group belongingness. *Unaddressed workplace conflict can jeopardize group functioning*. Conflict between two workers, for example, can start to seep into the entire team’s interactions, threatening the well-being of others and the chance of achieving collective goals. A manager who does not address or who avoids conflict may inadvertently create a dynamic where their avoidance makes him or her less accepted or respected by the entire group.

2. **We Can Have an Ingrained Stress Response to Conflict**
   
   Conflict situations can trigger an innate stress response. When we encounter something difficult or aversive, our natural tendency is to escape or avoid the situation. The easiest thing to do when confronted with conflict may be to pretend we don’t notice and hope that it will go away on its own. Here are some common workplace examples of how we attempt to avoid conflict:
   
   - Angrily stewing over a worker’s rude comment without addressing it openly
   - Keeping certain opinions to ourselves during worker evaluations because we don’t want to upset the worker
   - Trying to stop the conflict by sacrificing our own needs (e.g., taking on workers’ workloads so they do not argue over who does more)
   - Switching departments to avoid having to deal with a group of workers who don’t get along with each other
   - Procrastinating on scheduling a meeting to address conflict between two workers, hoping that the incident will just be forgotten.

   *While avoidance may bring short-term relief to our anxiety, it leaves the conflict unresolved. This can worsen or complicate the conflict for parties involved. It also denies managers the opportunity to build a stronger team and to reinforce their role as leader.*
3. **We are Positively Reinforced for Being Agreeable**
   For some of us, our default response when conflict arises is to be passive, minimizing or agreeable. This type of response is often positively rewarded by those who are or have been close to us (e.g., parents, partners, kids, friends); people tend to like people who don’t challenge them if a difficult or contentious issue arises. *Although avoidance of conflict is an adaptive response in some situations, this isn’t always the case. In workplace situations in particular, unaddressed conflict situations can often get worse, not better, over time.*

4. **We May Fear Backlash**
   We may often avoid conflict due to fears of damaging work relationships, or of being viewed as the “bad guy/girl”, or due to concerns our reputation will be damaged in some other way. One fundamental human need is to want to be viewed positively by others, including people we work with. *Avoiding conflict may serve us well in the short-term, but can lead to bigger problems if left unaddressed. Keep in mind that when a manager handles conflict situations ethically, professionally and respectfully, workers’ perceptions are often more positive than when the situations are left unaddressed.*