12-1-2007

Leadership for Today Managing Conflict Within Groups

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Leadership for Today
Managing Conflict Within Groups

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The human relationship is a complex and dynamic inter-action. As living creatures, we need and crave the oppor-tunity to interact with other humans by speaking, listen-ing, and spending time with them. Most of this interaction tends to be mutual and cordial. Yet, at times, the interac-tion can be laced with tension and discord. If left alone, the tension can lead to conflict that may damage the rela-tionship or even become volatile.

Conflict between individuals and within groups often occurs because people have differences of opinion, have different values and goals, or receive inaccurate informa-tion. Conflict is not always a bad thing. In many cases, conflict can lead to a better understanding of and response to issues. Conflict can also lead to creative problem solv-ing and the initiation of innovative ideas. However, if con-flict is suppressed and not addressed, it can lead to distrust and greater discord within the group.

In order for a group to be productive and successful, group members and leaders need to be able to identify, address, and resolve conflict successfully. Like any other leadership skill, conflict management can be learned. The overall goal for conflict management is to find common ground (mutual goals and interests that all parties share) within the issue and use that as the foundation for resolu-tion.

STRATEGIES FOR RESOLUTION

There are a variety of strategies for dealing with conflict. While some methods strive to preserve the relationship, other strategies can be harmful—depending upon the group and situation at hand. There are five basis strategies for conflict resolution:

1. Avoidance
2. Accommodation
3. Compromise
4. Competition
5. Collaboration

1. Avoidance

For some people, the idea of being involved in an inter-personal disagreement is enough to make their stomach ache. They detest the idea of conflict and will do almost anything to avoid it—including hiding their true feelings about an issue, leaving the room when the subject arises, postponing discussion by missing meetings, or even quit-ting the group altogether.

There may be times when avoidance of conflict is appro-priate. These times include the following:
a) The conflict is small and not worth the time of the group to respond.
b) Group members need time to calm down because relationships are at stake.
c) Time is needed to gather more information.

Group members quitting an organization because they wish to avoid a certain conflict should serve as a signal that that organization needs to address the issue of conflict management. Utilizing avoidance of conflict as an accept-able method of conflict resolution should not become a habit of organizations.

Avoidance is NOT an appropriate conflict management technique when
• the issue is very important,
• a decision is needed quickly,
• making "no decision" may have a negative impact on the situation or issue,
• postponing the issue may make matters worse because tensions may rise between group members.

2. Accommodation

This strategy can be convenient and immediate for a group. It can help a group identify things conflicting par-ties have in common, and it can also help the group remember its common purpose. Accommodation de-emphasizes the differences.

Accommodation example: "Though we can't seem to agree on the distribution details, we do agree as a group to financially support the city youth center. Let's form a subcommittee to work through the final details."

3. Compromise

Known as the middle ground, compromise is successful when all parties involved in the conflict come away having a part of their concerns met, while also being willing to sacrifice or be flexible about their remaining requests. In this strategy, compromise must be mutual for all parties. All individuals involved must receive something, and all parties must give up something.

Compromise can work when the desire to give and take is mutual and acceptable to all involved. It is a solution that, if everyone is open to it, can save time and effort. However, this strategy can be problematic if the initial demands of the conflict are too great or if there is no commitment by the parties involved to honor the compromise.

4. Competition

This strategy for conflict management is not beneficial in group situations—as it reinforces the concept of "I win, you lose." When used in group situations, this strategy reduces cooperation amongst group members and is often viewed as a power play by those who have connections to "the right people."

5. Collaboration

This strategy encourages teamwork and cooperation within a group. Collaboration does not allow one to gain power over others and does not establish winners or losers. It engages group members in creative problem solving while emphasizing a "win-win" philosophy. The goal of this strategy is to find a solution to the conflict that is both satisfying to everyone involved and fulfills the greatest needs or concerns of the group.

Collaboration is most successful when
  • group members trust and respect each other,
  • there is sufficient time for all group members to share their viewpoint,
  • members want the best possible solution for the good of the group,
  • members are willing to remain open minded until all of the information and viewpoints have been shared and potential solutions have been suggested.

While collaboration requires a great deal of time and trust from the group, it can also create energy and innovation within the group.

THE PROCESS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When conflict arises within a group, it is desirable to use an established process for working through the issue. Working through an issue allows group members to feel empowered and part of the discussion process, while also insuring that the dialogue does not deteriorate as emotions become involved.

A group leader or facilitator can utilize the following conflict resolution techniques to provide structure to a contentious situation:

1. **Agree on a time to resolve the conflict.** Whether that includes building it into an established meeting agenda, identifying a separate meeting to address the issue, or agreeing to meet for coffee, the time for addressing the issue should be agreeable to all involved. Make every attempt to identify a time that is accommodating to the energy levels of those involved—do not schedule the discussion for times when people are overly tired (late at night) or are trying to meet a deadline.

2. **The goal of conflict resolution is to create a solution that is acceptable to all parties—not an "I win, you lose" situation.** The group leader or facilitator should work with the group members to establish some ground rules—including rules that focus on members maintaining respect for each other— before discussion about the contentious issue begins. Sample ground rules for the discussion can include the following:
  a) Only one person speaks at a time.
  b) Only current facts related to the issue can be discussed.
  c) No personal attacks.
  d) Each person can speak for no longer than 2 minutes at a time (to avoid dominating the conversation).
  e) Ask clarifying questions to insure that you understand the ideas or concepts being discussed.
  f) "Time out" can be taken by anyone involved in the discussion.

3. **Remain focused on the issue at hand.** The discussion should not focus on   people, personalities, or the motivations that individuals may have regarding the contentious issue.

4. **Keep the discussion focused on the present.** Discussion about the issue should neither delve into fault finding nor involve irrelevant details from the past.

5. **Build in the option for "time out."** If emotions become intense, it is acceptable for the group leader or any group member to ask for time out—discontinuing the discussion for a brief period of time while the group steps

back and takes a break. The time out is designed to diffuse intensely emotional discussions in which people may begin to forget about the ground rules and pursue personal agendas during discussion. The time out allows for everyone to step away from the discussion, clear their thoughts, and calm down. Discussion can begin again after an identified period of time.

6. **Negotiate the resolution process.** This includes gathering the facts about the issue from both sides and then summarizing the key facts, feelings, and impacts that each party has identified. An opportunity should be provided for each party to add to or clarify the summary, as needed.

7. **Upon summarizing the situation, the facilitator should ask each party for their description of an appropriate resolution to the issue.** The facilitator can then identify areas in which common ground or shared interests exist—and use them as a place to begin resolution. The facilitator should be sure to include the group in identifying the solution that best meets the group's desired outcomes, shared interests, and goals.

8. **Reinforce the idea that "agreeing to disagree" is an acceptable solution to the discussion.**

9. **When the group has come to resolution, the facilitator should record the resolution and ask for confirmation that this written record reflects the decision that has been made.** Reinforce the need for an evaluation period in which to review or assess that the solution is either working or proceeding as desired.

Being more intentional about our individual "listening" skills is critical in conflict resolution. As a general rule, individuals are poor listeners—failing to listen for comprehension about other people's needs, wants, concerns, fears, and feelings. We tend to assert ourselves in conversation by questioning, confronting, or defending, versus listening to what others have to say. The result is that we often do not understand the true intentions of those we interact with.

A great deal of conflict can be resolved through the simple process of moving back and forth between active listening and, when verbally responding to someone, using "I" messages. This process allows both listener and speaker to clarify and understand each other's verbal messages and concerns, as well as the feelings behind them.

Active listening includes:
1. Giving the person that is speaking your total attention. Be sure to focus on their words instead of thinking about what you are going to say next.
2. Maintaining eye contact with the speaker.
3. Physically reacting to the conversation—nodding your head and smiling. Show that you are listening through your actions.
4. Using encouragement phrases like "tell me more" or "help me to understand what you mean."

"I" messages help to clarify the thoughts and feelings of others, but they are also useful tools for conveying the speaker's thoughts, opinions, and needs in a non-threatening way. Using "I" messages simply involves expressing words, thoughts, needs, and feelings in a straightforward statement that begins with "I am concerned about" or "I would prefer if we would" or "I suggest that we think about."

By utilizing this technique throughout the conflict resolution process, those involved can demonstrate respect for each other while expressing concern over an issue. This technique allows all involved to better understand the various factors of the issue, while also moving the entire process toward collaborative problem solving and resolution.

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