Human Resources Management Tools

Dealing with Challenge and Conflict

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Dealing with Challenge and Conflict

There's a commonly-held belief that conflict is a bad thing. But conflict reaches into all our work lives, and if handled properly it can actually enrich relationships and open up creativity. On the other hand, as occurs far too often, if badly handled it can destroy both personal and working relationships.

Challenge and conflict are common in cultural organizations, given multiple demands for severely limited resources, underpaid and overworked employees, disagreements over administrative and artistic priorities and the potential strains of board/management relations.

We rarely stop to examine exactly how we handle conflict[1]. The reason it is important to look closely at how you manage conflict in your work is that these conflicts present opportunities to innovate and create extremely productive environments. If you shy away from conflict, you fail to take advantage of cooperative conflict-reducing techniques to clear away obstacles and create a stimulating and productive workplace.

As a cultural manager you may have to handle and resolve conflicts with your employees, your superior, peer managers, Board members and patrons. In these guidelines we will focus on resolving the conflicts and challenges that *you* face with these individuals. But the concepts apply equally well when you have to mediate a conflict *between two other people* who have different goals or needs.

CONFLICT STYLES

Most of us tend to go through life trying to resolve conflicts using the same old behaviours, hoping for better results each time. Why? Because we don't *manage* how we personally deal with conflict, and because the stresses and high emotions of conflict situations lead us to fall back on our old habitual responses.

Each of us tends to have a personal way of dealing with conflict that takes over when we're under pressure. Sometimes it's the most productive style for resolving the conflict, but very often it's not and simply worsens the situation.

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[1] Note: Because there is always an element of conflict – however minor – in any challenge from another person, in these guidelines we will use the term *conflict* to mean either conflict or challenge.

How would you describe your own style of handling conflict?

- ▶ Do you avoid conflict, and just try to get away from the person with whom you're in conflict?

- ▶ Do you tend to accommodate the other person and "give in" right away? Do you prefer to let the other person get their way rather than get involved in a potentially difficult discussion?

- ▶ Or do you compete, fighting to win and not give an inch, regardless of whether this approach is likely to lead to the best solution?

- ▶ Perhaps your preference is to compromise, wanting simply to find an acceptable middle ground and get on with work. Your aim is to resolve conflicts as quickly and easily as possible.

- ▶ Or, your natural tendency may be to work together and cooperatively with your colleagues, to explore concerns and ideas - yours and theirs - to resolve the conflict. You like to collaborate to reach the best solution.

Using Different Conflict Styles

The following notes describe each of the five conflict-handling styles and are intended to help you better understand the way you personally handle conflict. We've also included guidelines on where each style might be appropriate and how to use it effectively. Later on we'll give you some hints on how to look at a *specific* conflict situation to decide on the best approach to take in resolving it.

THE "AVOID" STYLE

When you avoid conflict, you settle for the result that *both you and the other person lose*. You basically side-step or pull away from the whole situation. The conflict stays unresolved and nobody wins.

By ignoring or postponing the conflict, you prevent either yourself or the other person from resolving the conflict. However, sometimes conflicts *do* resolve themselves when left alone. For instance, people who are angry may try to start an argument with you over minor things that they won't care about later on, after they've calmed down. Obviously it's also wise to avoid any conflicts in which you think there may be some danger, either because the other person may completely lose control, or because he or she is simply too powerful for you to deal with on a level playing field.

Avoidance is often the best initial response to conflicts when you're unprepared for them. But use it as a short-term strategy for buying time and deciding how best to handle the situation. You may try to arrange a time to discuss the situation, and pick a time as far in the future as the other person will easily agree to. This will give you time to consider your approach to resolving the conflict or at least be in a better position by then. If the other person has a deadline, your avoidance may put you in a better position. They may be more willing to collaborate or compromise if they're facing an imminent deadline.

THE "ACCOMMODATE" STYLE

When you accommodate, you accept that *you lose* and *the other person wins*. You put aside your own wishes and priorities and give the other person what they want.

This style is appropriate when you place a high value on your relationship with the other person. It's also appropriate when the end result of the conflict is not all that important to you, but is very important to the other person.

Be careful about using the accommodating style – it can be very close to the "avoid" approach. If you hear yourself saying things like "*It doesn't matter to me*" or "*Whatever you say,*" you may be avoiding asserting yourself. You might in fact have very useful and informed views to offer on the situation, but want to avoid any form of confrontation.

Remember that in order for both of you to feel good about the result, you need to feel that you made a proactive, conscious decision to allow the other person's needs to be met. The other person should see that you've given up something that is important to you, in order to resolve the conflict. As a result they'll see you as cooperative rather than weak. You will also have increased the likelihood that the other person will respond to your needs in a similar way if there's another future conflict situation.

THE "COMPETE" STYLE

When you compete, your desired outcome is that *you win* and *the other person loses.* There's no middle ground - you want to win your point at the expense of the other person losing theirs.

Competing is appropriate when only one person can get to their desired end result. It's best used when the outcome is extremely important, and the relationship is not really very important. Many different work situations call for the competing style in order for the conflict to be resolved quickly and effectively. Examples of situations where the competing style can be appropriate are:

- when there can be only one "winner"
- emergency situations that call for split-second decision making
- when making a fairly quick decision is crucial.

Be careful not to attach an overall negative connotation to the competing style. As described above it has many appropriate uses. Obviously, though, it can have a disruptive effect if you overuse it - taking a "winning at all costs" approach regardless of the situation. Competing takes time and energy. So be sure that you evaluate the situation objectively. "Pick your battles" carefully and make sure that the end result justifies the time and energy that it will take you to win.

The "Compromise" Style

In the compromise style, *both of you win* and *both of you lose*. You resolve the conflict quickly and efficiently by looking for a fair and equitable split between your viewpoints. When you compromise, each of you gives in on some of your issues in order to get concessions from the other person. For compromise to work effectively, both of you are flexible and willing to settle for an acceptable solution to your major problem. The compromise style is most appropriate when the end result is somewhat important, but the relationship is of quite high importance. It's most useful when you want a quick solution to a conflict.

True compromise requires honesty and reasonableness. Taking an exaggerated opening position in order to leave as much room as possible to "concede" issues later on may be viewed as a challenge to the other person to do the same. This can lead both of you to distrust the real motivation of the other, and the resolution process can quickly change to competing. The compromise style works best when there is a fair amount of trust between both of you and/or the facts of both your and the other person's real needs are clearly understood.

The "Collaborate" Style

When you collaborate, you want *both you and the other person to win*. You cooperate with the other person to try to resolve a common problem and arrive at a mutually satisfying outcome. It's important that *both* of you feel that an outcome reached through collaboration will be better than the outcome either of you could achieve on your own.

In true collaboration, each person starts by sharing information – not potential concessions. Both of you have to candidly share insights into your situations - what your concerns and constraints are. You need to keep an open mind, temporarily set aside your own priorities, and consider different approaches and viewpoints.

Collaboration needs trust between people. It needs a situation in which creative problem solving will truly benefit both of you, and it needs a high level of communication and problem-solving skills. Using the collaborative approach requires the highest investment of time and energy of any of the conflict-handling styles. Use it when both the end result and the relationship are very important to both of you.

Should We *Always* Collaborate?

It's pretty obvious that the "win/win" result of collaboration is the most rewarding for both sides in any conflict.

But it's important to note that the collaborative approach is *not* the best approach for all conflict situations. It is the most difficult of all styles to achieve, because it calls for the participation and cooperation of both you and the other person. It's also the most time consuming. Use it, therefore, in situations where the end result is very important to both of you. Do *not* use it when a quick resolution is necessary, because real collaboration usually takes time. If you feel pressured to come to a decision, both of you will be frustrated, and you'll often find that you lapse into a less appropriate style. Day-to-day management issues are often effectively and satisfactorily resolved using one of the other strategies.

Experience has shown that effective collaboration is an essential ingredient if you really want to get high levels of motivation, job satisfaction, creativity, and productivity among your staff. But again, remember that not every decision has to be made through the collaborative process. Managers who try to collaborate on *all* situations may be wasting time and avoiding taking responsibility for their actions. Also, using the collaborative approach all the time - particularly with your staff - may create false expectations about people's right to have input on all decision-making.

Collaboration is the most satisfying approach because both of you feel that you have gotten what you wanted, and your relationship is unaffected or even improved. It takes work, but it's worth the effort if your goal is to get long-term satisfaction and build effective relationships.

Although each of the five conflict-handling styles is valid and appropriate in specific situations, we'll look in more depth at how to resolve conflict collaboratively.

Making Collaboration Work

Studies have shown that less than half of people rate themselves as collaborators in conflict situations, and less than a third are rated as collaborators by others. This means that in the majority of conflicts, at least one of the participants is, by nature, not a collaborator! However, in most cultural workplaces and personal conflicts, collaboration is usually the most productive style. Therefore, you'll often encounter conflicts in which collaboration is not the other person's (or your!) most comfortable style. Your challenge is to recognize the dynamics of what's happening, move the conflict away from another style and do your level best to make it collaborative.

A problem: When the other person doesn't seem to want to collaborate, your efforts to collaborate make you vulnerable. It takes two to collaborate, and people often complain that their efforts to collaborate fail because the other person is immersed in another conflict-handling style.

This is important, because *in any situation where you care about **both** the end result and the relationship, collaboration is the best style by far.* Other approaches won't produce as positive an outcome. Since the odds are that neither you nor the other person has collaboration as your natural style, you will need to recognize this and consciously work toward a collaborative approach. It will take energy, cooperation, and time, but the results will lead to greater success and satisfaction for everyone.

Following are suggested ways to make collaboration work most effectively:

▶ *Share information openly.*

In most conflicts, people react defensively and don't share information fully. To collaborate, you must share information freely. Make sure your wish to collaborate is clear by being open and honest with the other person. Explain that you want them to understand your position fully, and ask them to share information about their situation with you. Reinforce that you're more likely to be able to help them if you understand the situation more clearly. Always give and ask for information in the context of *helping each other*.

▶ *Encourage the other person to share their needs and desires with you.*

Understanding each other's needs and goals is essential to successful collaboration. Keep asking the other person what they need and want. Keep

explaining what you need and want too. Restate your aim to make sure *both of your* needs and wants are met.

► *Explore multiple options.*

Collaborations only work when you're open to exploring a wide range of options. Make clear your intent is to find new and better ways to resolve the conflict by suggesting as many options as you can and make it clear that you're not wedded to any one option. You simply want to find a solution that works for both of you. Your behaviour will encourage the other person to look at novel approaches to the conflict too.

► *Postpone the discussion if feelings are too high.*

Collaborations require an open, cooperative, friendly environment. Anger, frustration, suspicion and other strong emotions disrupt or prevent collaboration. Keep in mind that heated approaches to conflict lead to hasty solutions, not cooperative problem solving. When things get too tense, simply say you don't want to work on the issue at the moment because feelings are getting in the way. Ask for time for one or both of you to cool off. Make it clear that your goal is to work *together* on the problem. Wait for your or the other person's emotions to settle. It takes patience to manage feelings – yours or other people's.

► *Stick to collaborating before discussing solutions in depth.*

If the other person pressures you for a commitment before openly sharing relevant information and taking a joint problem-solving approach, take a step back and refocus the conversation. Explain that you don't want to consider solutions until you've had a chance to explore the problem more fully. Make it clear that you believe that a collaborative approach will be best for both of you.

► *Be creative in looking at the problem.*

Remember that you need to work together to understand the problem better, and then to generate creative alternatives. Only when you have some real insights into the problem and some better alternatives should you switch gears and worry about exactly which solution to adopt. Start the collaborative process by exploring the problem together.

A Format for Creating a Collaborative Environment

Spend time discussing the problem. Exactly what is the problem from each of your perspectives? Have either of you overlooked aspects of the problem, exaggerated it, or confused one problem with another? When you both really commit to discussing and thinking about the problem itself, you often find new and better ways to look at it.

Generate lots of possible options. After talking about the problem itself, you now need to explore possible solutions. Since you're in conflict, you must have competing views of how to resolve the problem. Disagreement tends to cement these views, making it hard for both of you to see alternatives. But are there other ways of thinking about the problem or the solution that might lead to noncompetitive ways to solve it? Can you think of three, or five, or ten more viable alternatives? When you apply creative thinking, you can often come up with new options that give both of you better outcomes and are also better for your relationship.

Agree on the best option. The collaboration is successfully completed when both of you feel pleasantly surprised at the way in which you've discovered an "out", or a better approach that ends your conflict. When both of you agree on a new and better approach, then you can resolve the conflict to everyone's advantage.

Following these guidelines should help you to create positive and satisfying outcomes. Through developing a range of conflict-handling skills, you can approach each situation with the awareness and actions that will lead to the best solution.

Choosing the Best Style

In a particular conflict situation, you may not be sure which approach is likely to lead to the best solution. Following are some questions you can ask yourself when assessing the situation and trying to decide the optimal approach. The questions build on our concept that different situations call for different conflict-management styles.

For a specific conflict situation, ask yourself:

1. Is my relationship with this person important, either for business or personal reasons?

2. Am I and the other person often in the same room because of common interests or activities?

3. Do I care what this person thinks of me once we've resolved this conflict?

4. In the past, has my relationship with this person involved a lot of communication?

5. Do I suspect that the other person has some hidden motives in this case?

6. Might the way we deal with this conflict "set the scene" for how future conflicts are handled?

7. Is it worth me spending a lot of time to resolve this conflict?

8. Will I feel badly if I don't get what I want in this conflict?

If you answered "Yes" to most or all of questions 1 to 4, then **your long-term relationship** with the other person is probably quite (or very) important to you.

If you answered "Yes" to most or all of questions 5 to 8, then **the end result of the conflict** is probably the most important factor for you, rather than your on-going relationship with the other person.

To decide which conflict-handling style is likely to work best, consider your answers – *coupled with your own judgement* - in relation to the following statements:

> ► When neither the result nor relationship matter to you, an *Avoid* style will probably be most effective.

> ► When the result is not important but the relationship is, an *Accommodate* style will probably be most effective.

> ► When the result and relationship are both quite important to you, a *Compromise* style will probably be most effective.

> ► When the result and relationship are both very important to you, a *Collaborate* style will probably be most effective.

> ► When the result is important but the relationship is not, a *Compete* style will probably be most effective.

Communication Skills: The Keys to Successful Conflict-Resolution

Most people prefer non-confrontational approaches to resolving conflict. Since the best results are often achieved through collaborations, it makes good sense to work on one's conflict-handling skills in order to get better at shifting conflicts toward collaborative solutions.

It's difficult to handle conflicts well unless both of you have strong communication skills. These skills give us a better range of tools to help navigate through the conflict resolution process. Think about working on your one-on-one communications as well as working on handling specific conflicts.

Most conflicts provide less than ideal conditions for using good communication skills. When you're approaching an opening night, a major exhibition, or fine-tuning a new production, everyone may be stressed and preoccupied with their own responsibilities. What can you, as a manager, do under those circumstances? There are key communication rules that will help you get a satisfactory outcome to almost any conflict situation. Here they are:

MAINTAIN A SUPPORTIVE ATMOSPHERE

Atmosphere is of course an intangible, but its effects are felt by both people in a conflict. How things progress will be largely affected by the kind of atmosphere you develop. Atmospheres can be described in many ways: cool, honest, frantic, overpowering, and friendly are just a few. But for the purposes of resolving conflicts, only two atmospheres matter: defensive or supportive.

A *defensive atmosphere* is created when the people involved start criticizing each other, act superior, or try to control each other. The effects of a defensive atmosphere on the communication process are that the people involved share less information, trust each other less and are basically less effective in problem solving.

Supportive atmospheres on the other hand are created when you both make an attempt to enter each other's world and see things from the other person's perspective. In a supportive atmosphere you both listen to each other and focus on helping both of you satisfy your needs. Supportive atmospheres are particularly conducive to resolving difficult conflicts.

The first communication rule is clear:

Take the time to consciously build and maintain a supportive atmosphere, regardless of the complexity and frustration of the situation.

STAY ASSERTIVE

The ways we influence people can be divided into three broad categories: aggressive, passive, and assertive. Aggressive approaches are domineering, pushy, and self-centered. Passive strategies are compliant, apologetic, and self-effacing. Assertive strategies are open, direct, and receptive.

The problem with aggressive or passive influence approaches is that they consider the needs of only one person. Aggression leads to ignoring the interests of the other person and passivity leads to ignoring one's own needs. Either approach can result in a less than satisfactory outcome.

Maintaining an assertive stance is the best way of ensuring that your needs will be heard and satisfied. And, because being assertive includes being open and receptive to the concerns of others, assertiveness on the part of both of you will improve the chances of a win-win outcome. Remaining assertive when confronted with a difficult person in a conflict situation is, of course, easier said than done. But it's important to stay aware that it's a key communication skill.

The second communication rule for resolving conflicts:

Stay assertive regardless of temptations to behave otherwise. This means being clear about your own needs at the same time as being considerate of the other person's needs.

ACTIVELY LISTEN

You need to concentrate on listening actively to understand the meaning and the intent of the other person. This may sound simple but imagine the difficulty of listening to someone else when all you can hear is the mental noise of your own arguments and feelings. Listening and speaking seem to be skills that have to be practiced separately. Every management development program in the last two decades has tried to help managers improve these skills. Nonetheless, few people do a noticeably good job of listening to others.

There are a few components of effective listening that everyone can learn and put into practice. Here are some of the important ones for consideration:

► Use body language to let the other party know that you are trying to listen. Make eye contact, lean slightly toward the other person, and remain silent until the other party is finished.

► Focus on clarifying what the other person is saying instead of thinking about what you'll say when it's your turn.

► Try summarizing and paraphrasing the person's message occasionally, particularly when it is long and involved. Don't do this too frequently because it may sound phony and annoying. Do it when you aren't sure if you've grasped exactly what the other person is saying.

The third communication rule to remember is:

Make every effort, both verbally and non-verbally, to let the other person know that you are listening and interested in what they are saying.

Continually Probe for More Information

You need to probe when you need more information or aren't clear about what the other person is *thinking*. People often say things that sound plausible on the surface, but until we hear more detail, your information may be incomplete and your conclusions wrong. Probes may take the form of open-ended questions, meaningful pauses, requests to enlarge on an idea, encouragement, closed-end questions, leading questions, and summarizing statements. With a little practice you can learn which probes will start productive discussions and keep them going, and which one shut the conversation down.

The fourth communication rule to follow is:

Probe as much as possible to make sure that you have all the necessary information you need about the other person, so you clearly understand their position.

BE SENSITIVE TO NONVERBAL CUES

So far we've identified four key communication skills that are primarily verbal in nature. The next rule suggests that managers also require an exceptional sensitivity to what is happening *nonverbally*. Nonverbal communication includes everything other than what is actually said. It includes how people sit, eye movement, gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, and fidgeting with things like pencils and eyeglasses. Experts estimate that more than half of the meaning of a message is transmitted nonverbally. Of course what people say matters. But the fact is that everything *else* they do is often even more important than what they actually say.

How do you know when the other person is really ready to start talking seriously about resolving the conflict? If you watch for nonverbal signals, you won't need to be told. You'll know that the other person is ready, for example, when they stop paging through notes, having side conversations with others, or takes on a posture of readiness. How do you know when the other person is starting to resist your suggestions? A grim facial expression, crossed arms and legs, or tightening the grip on a pen may speak as clearly as anything they say.

We all unconsciously and regularly respond to the nonverbal behaviour of others. We develop this sensitivity and responsiveness from birth. Most of the time we aren't aware that we're relying on the nonverbal signals of others to help decide our responses to them. As a manager, however, if you want to be effective in a conflict situation, you'll make it your business to watch for and study this behaviour, and respond appropriately to it.

Our fifth communication rule then is:

Be very sensitive to the range of nonverbal behaviours that the other person is consciously or unconsciously sending you. Those clues may tell you much more than what they are saying and help you move towards resolving the conflict.

Handling Conflict with a Difficult Person

Inevitably, we all occasionally find ourselves in conflict with a "difficult" person where we find it hard to apply the skills that have worked well elsewhere. In these cases you need to recognize or identify the behaviour, to try to understand it, and to find a way to cope with it, whether that involves confronting the behaviour directly or learning to live with it in some way. In interpersonal conflict, cultural and ethnic differences and resulting underlying values and biases may also be complicating the situation.

If you find yourself in this kind of conflict situation and are angry, give yourself (and the other person) time to cool off before you do anything else. Then you need to decide whether it's worth trying to change the other person's behaviour. How much work it will take? Is the outcome likely to be positive? Are there risks involved? You may have to accept that some people are unwilling or unable to change in the way you want them to. If that's the case, you need to concentrate on the changes *you* can make, and the steps you can take to cope with the behaviour.

If you decide to try for changes, remember that successful conflict resolution depends on effective communication. This, in turn, depends on two factors: (1) acknowledging, appreciating, and productively using the differences in people, and (2) developing a personal approach for dealing effectively with difficult people. Try these suggestions:

- *Be very clear with yourself about exactly what behaviour bothers you,* not the values that lie behind the behaviour (people will throw up all kinds of resistance to changes in their values). Concentrate on the behaviour, not the person.

- *Face the behaviour* in as non-threatening a way as possible. Stay focused on the behaviour and try to avoid attacking the person.

- *As always, be willing to listen attentively to the other person.* Use your listening skills and sensitivity to pick up facts and feelings from the other person. Keep the discussion as impersonal as possible. Let the other person ventilate.

- *Work on the conflict by trying to meet both your needs.* Be collaborative as far as possible.

- *Put the resolution into action.*

In summary, studies of real-life conflicts indicate that many, if not most, people find it hard to resolve conflicts in ways that strengthen relationships. But it's a worthy goal to pursue. It can be achieved through recognizing and using the appropriate approach to a conflict, and by working at strengthening your key communication skills as described above.

Tips

► Separate individuals from the problems. Remind yourself that the problem is the *issue* or *relationship,* not the individuals themselves.

► Be flexible about the other person's viewpoint or style of working.

► Accept that a different opinion or approach is simply different, not wrong. Remember that there are differences in thinking styles. Acknowledge and appreciate these differences.

► Don't attach negative labels to people.

► Continually focus on getting results rather than personal positions.