

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

Keeping the Peace

Make conflict management a strategic advantage in your workplace

Research reports indicate that managers and leaders spend 20-40% of their time dealing with conflict, this is a significant investment of time, money and energy, and that unresolved or poorly managed conflict is leading to about 50% of the resignations. HR reports suggest that to replace one employee, the cost is more than their annual salary.

Ensuring that everyone is well trained on conflict management skills with policies that effectively support the resolution of conflict with proper processes in place all make good financial sense. Many senior HR executives spend up to 20% of their time engaged in litigation activities, most of which relate to workplace conflict. Identifying conflicts quickly and addressing them effectively will produce results that positively impact relationships, performance and productivity. These benefits far outweigh the cost of implementing conflict management programs in the workplace.

So how does an organization turn the tables and create a culture and system to effectively respond to conflict?

Culture

The mindset and belief system in an organization directly impact the degree to which conflict will be managed effectively. The prevailing belief system in some organizations is that conflict is a threat to relationships and team cohesiveness, so people should do what it takes to respectfully accept others' views and needs and work collaboratively to resolve issues. Some organizations view conflict as negative and a drain on time and energy, so conflict issues should be avoided whenever possible. Other organizations see conflict as a challenge to a person's credibility, reputation and authority, so people respond in a strong and competitive manner to protect their position. Other organizations see the necessity for flexibility, collaboration, mutual concessions and compromise as a way of resolving conflicts in a way that maintains healthy relationships and a healthy culture.

Ensure your organization chooses the belief system that promotes kindness, acceptance and respect and effectively managed conflict. Provide training and communications frequently throughout the year so the culture becomes ingrained and also provide leaders with support to ensure the culture is modelled in how they show up and how they lead.

Systems

A great place to start when ensuring your systems support a conflict responsive organization is to review your policies and procedures. Next, review the current practices of how conflict is typically resolved and addressed. Take an inventory of training and skillset development that has been offered in the workplace. Review your communication practices. Then verify the services that can be accessed in conflict situations. For example, does your organization have a process to report concerns? Does your organization provide a clear path for employees to address concerns without starting a formal complaint? Are there requirements for leaders to address conflicts in a specific manner? Do you have internal neutrals or internal mediators who can assist? Identify any gaps and opportunities in the systems and processes that currently exist.



Charmaine
Hammond
President, Hammond
International Inc.

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Supports

Most organizational conflicts involve disagreements or miscommunication over task-related matters. In an organization you have people with different personalities, different working styles and diverse perspectives on how to approach a task. Helping teams understand the different working styles and how to work effectively will go a long way in improving team success. When I work with organizations to create Team Charters, set up conflict management systems or provide training on conflict management response and skills, I always take the team through a working style inventory. Immediately team members begin to see the value of knowing how to work differently with all the working styles. This information alone can reduce miscommunication and frustration and head off a difference in approach from turning into a dispute.

The other supports essential to advancing your workplace conflict management system include:

- 1) Training employees on communication and conflict resolution skills.
- 2) Ensuring that conflict is identified, addressed and followed up on quickly and effectively.
- 3) Provide coaching and mentoring to employees to help employees effectively prepare for situations when they must have difficult conversations or address a conflict.
- 4) Provide access to early neutral evaluation and interest based resolution processes such as mediation.

Organizations that commit to creating a culture based on respect and effective conflict resolution provide employees and leaders with the skills to address issues. This will result in the organizations experiencing fewer turnovers, better managed conflict and a much happier productive workplace.

Charmaine Hammond is President of Hammond International Inc. and can be reached via email at charmaine@hammondgroup.biz.