

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

Conflict Management for Non-Experts

Strategies for success



Members
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Staff Writer

HR directors and managers are often the first line of defence when it comes to conflict management in the workplace. Even though it may not be their main area of expertise, they need a broad range of strategies and techniques to deal with all the different situations that may arise. They also need a basic understanding of conflict management, how it arises and the consequences that it can inflict on the workplace.

Workplace conflict can be generally described as any disagreement or behaviour that interrupts workflow, prevents people from working well together, or stifles creativity. The impact of conflict tends to extend beyond those directly involved and can have ripple effects in terms of how others feel at work or even how they view the organization. In order for conflict to be dealt with swiftly and effectively, it is important for those managing it to understand what and who they're dealing with and to communicate in appropriate terms. Here are some insights for managing conflict for the nonexperts.

De-escalation is the main goal

Conflicts happen - it is just a part of life and work. Throw in the added stress of being in a working environment with people who haven't chosen each other as colleagues and it can be difficult to always reach a meaningful compromise. If tempers are allowed to rise, people are likely to say things they don't really mean. A small argument can quickly get out of hand. For this reason, small disputes or simmering disagreements should be addressed head-on. Ignoring something until it is a crisis is the textbook definition of what not to do. If there appears to be trouble on the horizon, it is a manager's job to step in and help resolve the conflict before it escalates.

Both sides need to reach an agreement

All managers will sometimes be asked to play the mediator. The challenge in that role is to not be seen as favouring one side over the other, even as the manager does exactly that. Try not to force a winner at the onset. Instead, encourage the parties to talk and hopefully this will lead to some sort of concession by one of them. By simply ordering a ceasefire and insisting the conflict be left behind, the root of the problem will remain and will likely flare up again in the future. It is important to remember that conflict management is less about finding an actual solution to the immediate problem. It is more about offering strategies and methods that help the two parties to communicate productively with each other.

There is a difference between conflict management and conflict resolution

Conflict management is what takes place when there is a situation in which there's something that can be negotiated. It is generally the case that each side is expressing different interests and need help arriving at a compromise. Unlike conflict resolution which focuses on finding a solution to the problem as soon as possible, conflict management seeks to investigate and address the root cause.

Addressing internal conflicts

As a society, we're working towards a better understanding of mental health and how it affects people and their actions. Identifying and dealing with internal conflict is an important part of this. An individual may be struggling internally with a difficult decision, fear of failure or lack of confidence. Although this form of

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conflict rarely leads to disputes, it nevertheless has the potential to create problems. If an employee is struggling and hesitates to make decisions, their work will suffer as a result. It is important for leaders to be aware of such dynamics and to reach out to the individual who appears to be experiencing issues.

Addressing communication

Probably the most common type of conflict that needs to be managed at the workplace involves problems in communication. In many cases, no one starts off with bad intentions, but unexpected factors can come to light that escalate a situation which had previously been harmless. The best way to address this is to uncover the communication error and try to account for why it happened. In some cases, it will have arisen due to different personalities or the fact that people have divergent expectations. This is simply part of human nature and impossible to avoid completely. That is why it is important to have a standard procedure to follow to manage conflict when two personalities clash.

Addressing power conflicts

Within an organization, people fulfill different roles, sometimes planned and sometimes unplanned. One of the other common causes of conflict is when an employee sees themselves in a different role to that assigned to them. This can lead to a situation in which one party believed they're higher up than the other and a power struggle ensues, as neither wants to relinquish control. In this case, it is the role of the conflict manager to intervene and clarify the appropriate roles.

Keep it clean

You cannot eliminate all conflict in the workplace, but you can set rules of engagement for when it happens and then try to minimize the damage. Conflict should never be allowed to escalate into harassment or abuse, but sometimes it's okay to hash out differences. Everyone must keep it clean and agree that at some point, the discussion is over and it's back to work.

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