Understanding and managing conflict

Dr Carol Clark (Inspiring leaders 2013/2014) Case Study

Introduction: Understanding conflict – Conflict is natural in society and every day interactions between people. It relates to personal values, ideas and interests and occurs on a continuum. It needs to be acknowledged as helpful in some situations and unhelpful in others. Where it is helpful conflict can enable a team to make the right collective decisions. Where it is unhelpful it may make us feel uncomfortable. Depending on who we are and how the issue affects us we may react in different ways:- avoidance, aggression, resolution. The way in which these aspects are then perceived by others adds another dimension. The fear of conflict is one of five important features affecting successful team working (Lencioni 2002). To facilitate effective team working in my new role I knew I would need to be proactive in resolving conflict and that I needed some strategies and coaching.

Aims: The aims of this case study were to improve my ability to resolve conflict and reflect on my learning.

Methods: Identify literature and evidence relating to conflict resolution using; the BU manager's tool kit (GoodPractice 2013); learning from the workshops and Action Learning Sets that I attended as part of the Inspiring Leaders Course. Identify which tools I perceived worked best during the academic year and reflect on their use. (See Text boxes 1-3 below). Work with mentor, staff development team, HR and line manager to establish best practice.

Results: Over the year I facilitated 15 individual meetings (8 follow up meetings) and 4 group meetings (2 follow up) in which 'conflict' was identified as the main reason for the meeting. I have divided the results into outcomes and measures of success. Outcomes relate to my learning and measures of success relate to colleagues feedback about the meetings.

Outcomes:

- Identification of strategies and ideas for handling individual and group meetings

- Better understanding of the complexities and longitudinal nature of addressing conflict

- Learning from colleagues

- The importance of pre-empting conflict and addressing issues early.

- Increased confidence in handling different situations

- A chance to reflect on using different strategies these are described in the reflective narrative around the various approaches I used.

Measures of success

The process of conflict resolution over the year changed as I became more confident in addressing issues. Colleagues reported:

- Setting up a structured meeting enabled participants to vent their feelings, feel listened to and find a way to work through the conflict. Although some reported that sometimes the result fell short of their expectations.

- Team members were aware that measures were being taken to resolve conflict and some have reported this has had a positive effect on team working and how they feel valued as an individual. That a plan had been put in place and a few felt the process had not been what they expected.

- Others reported there is still more that needs to be done.

Discussion: I learnt that by having a variety of strategies I was better equipped to resolve conflict. I learnt that by firmly setting the ground rules, context and issues to be addressed and focusing on these improved the flow of a meeting. I struggled with facilitating emotion and feelings to be discussed and this is an aspect I will need to continue to work on and address. Agreeing a time frame for a plan and following up were also important lessons.

Conclusion: The Inspiring leaders course equipped me with a more comprehensive approach to better resolve conflict, while my new role gave me the opportunity to put the learning into practice. The Action Learning Sets, support from my mentor and colleagues enabled me to realise that similar issues required addressing across the school and that solutions were not always found.

Methods Text boxes - strategies

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1. Strategies for managing conflict (Mango 2007)

Run

Change your attitude

Change their attitude

Take a stand

Run – if it is not your fight, if you cannot change your attitude or the other persons.

Change your attitude - check your perceptions, understand their perspective, see beyond the 'difficult', see the person as a person

Change their attitude – Understand why, offer an alternative perspective, acknowledge their difficulty get them to see you as a person

Take a stand – last option when you cannot run and cannot alter attitudes. Show discomfort, disapproval, take it seriously, divide and conquer – tackle individuals not groups.

Reflection: *This situation worked for managing individuals rather than groups. I believe it worked best if there could be facilitation of attitude change between either myself and an individual, or two individuals. There was often a requirement for both sides to acknowledge a need to 'modify' their attitude to a behaviour or issue. Prior to exploring the use of this strategy my inherent reaction might have been to either RUN or TAKE A STAND. I believe discussions during the Action Learning Sets and with a mentor helped me to explore these aspects in a supportive environment.*

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2. Conflict resolution meeting process.

- Establish ground rules (see text box below)
- Confirm issue(s) to be discussed – set the context of the issue
- Allow honest reactions – but don't let these take over
- Explore ideas on resolving issues
- Highlight potential barriers
- Agree a plan that creates solutions and acknowledges barriers
- Discuss how the plan will be implemented
- Agree a time frame
- Set a follow up meeting

Reflection: - *I learnt to be firmer in establishing ground rules and in confirming the issues to be discussed. Following advice from my mentor, colleagues and with practice I recognised the need to re-visit the ground rules and keep the discussion focused on the issues initially identified at the beginning of the meeting. Agreeing a time frame and setting up a follow up meeting were equally important and enabled some measurement of 'success'.*

Establishing Ground rules

- Meeting to be carried out in an open and respectful manner
- Meeting to be facilitated openly
- Participation encouraged from all present
- Notes to be taken
- Summary of notes to be read out at the end to enable clarification of points.
- Notes of meeting to be sent to all participants

3. Six steps – for resolving conflict (Byrne 2013):
- **S** source of the conflict – identify who is involved and or the issue
- **T** time and Place – important to find the best time to have the discussion and find a place that is suitable – not public.
- **A** amicable approach Start with a genuine specific positive comment
- **B** behaviour identify the behaviour problem
- **E** emotion - explain how this has made you feel I felt…. This has to be personal to you, do not include others.
- **N** need - what do you want to gain from this discussion explain what you want… what result are you hoping for this needs considering before you start.

Reflection: These steps were really useful in planning a conversation and I used this strategy with individuals rather than groups. I had the opportunity to discuss this in one of the Action Learning Sets. I was encouraged to address issues 'early on' and therefore may not have given enough consideration to 'time'. A useful tip was to start with a positive comment. Considering 'emotion' was something I had not previously acknowledged as being important and I still find this difficult to articulate. I recognise that before I had worked with these 6 steps that I often addressed conflict without having a firm outcome.

References:

Byrne, J, 2013. How to turn a conflict into a collaborative discussion Conflict resolution in 6 easy steps. youtube.com/watch?

GoodPractice 2013. What's new in Bournemouth University Toolkit for Managers.

Lencioni, P, 2002. The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable. New York Wiley

Mango, A, 2007. How to deal with difficult people at work. Youtube.com/watch?