

Understanding and managing conflict

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Introduction- Understanding conflict

Conflict is a natural part of everyday interactions. It relates to personal values, ideas and interests and occurs on a continuum – helpful to unhelpful. When conflict is helpful it can enable a team to make the right collective decisions; when unhelpful it may lead to discomfort within the team. Depending on who we are and how the issue affects us we may react in different ways: avoidance, aggression, acceptance. The way in which these aspects are then perceived by others adds another dimension. Fear of conflict affects 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 was aware that I lacked the tools and experience to do this.

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) and the learning from the workshops and Action Learning Sets that I attended as part of the Inspiring Leaders Course. Identify which tools worked best and reflect on their use.

1. Strategies for managing conflict (Mango 2007)

Run if it is not your fight, if attitudes cannot be changed.

Change your attitude check your perceptions, understand their perspective, see beyond the 'difficult', see the person.

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

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



2. Conflict resolution meeting process

- Establish **ground rules**
- Confirm issue(s) to be discussed – set the context
- 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



Ground rules

- Carry out the meeting in an open and respectful manner.
- Facilitate the meeting openly.
- Encourage participation from all present
- Take notes.
- Read out a summary of notes at the end to clarify points.
- Send the notes of the meeting to all participants.

3. Six steps – for resolving conflict (Byrne 2013)

1. Source of the conflict – identify who is involved and or the issue
2. Time and Place – important to find the best time to have the discussion and find a place that is suitable – not public.
3. Amicable approach Start with a genuine specific positive comment
4. Behaviour identify the behaviour problem
5. Emotion - explain how this has made you feel I felt.... This has to be personal to you, do not include others.
6. Need - what do you want to gain from this discussion what result are you hoping for.



Results

Over the year I facilitated 19 meetings in which 'conflict' was identified as the main factor. Individual meetings were held for 15 of these, including 8 follow up, 4 group meetings were held including 2 follow up. I divided the results into outcomes and measures of success. Outcomes related to my learning which included identifying strategies, receiving feedback and increasing confidence in addressing issues. Measures of success related to colleagues feedback; in which some acknowledged the positive effect on team working and feeling more valued as an individual; that a plan had been put in place and a few felt the process had not been what they expected.

Discussion & Conclusion

I learnt that by having a variety of strategies I was better equipped to resolve conflict. Firmly setting the ground rules, context and issues to be addressed improved the focus and flow of a meeting. I struggled with facilitating emotion and feelings and this aspect I will need to continue to address. Identifying an outcome and agreeing a time frame for a plan and following up were also important lessons.

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 there were similar issues in other departments and that solutions were not always found.