

Conflict in the Workplace is Increasing - How Do You Combat?

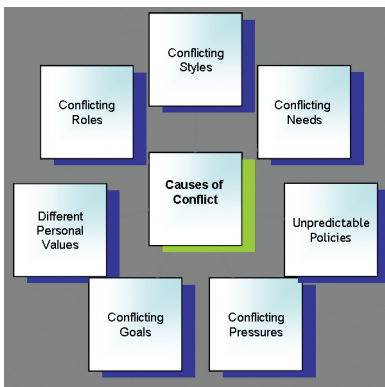
The economic downturn has spurred a dramatic increase in the stress levels of most of the people you work with on a daily basis. It is hard for anyone to avoid the strains of rising interest rates and disproportionately high cost of living expenses. Add to that, the work environment is building tensions of its own; growing redundancies and general cutbacks set against growing demand for efficiency and effectiveness.

Faced with this situation, it is more important than ever for business managers and personnel to recognize the risks and know how to implement strategies for minimizing stress and conflict in the workplace.

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Conflict is defined as a sharp disagreement or opposition of interests or ideas. By far the best way to combat conflict in the workplace is to nip it in the bud. Training and awareness in addition to professional support services go a long way to help reduce conflict in its earliest stages. Numerous case studies demonstrate the importance of the pre-emptive strike against conflict.

Among the most common forms of conflict in the workplace are perpetuated by general misunderstandings and differences of opinion relating to procedural decisions. The most common issues include conflicts of need, roles, styles, goals, and pressures.



WHY IS CONFLICT A BUSINESS PROBLEM?

In high stress situations, however, it is important to remember exactly what stress is. You may not know it, but stress is a manifestation of a person's feeling that they need either to fight or flee from a particular situation.

Unfortunately, as more

and more businesses are seeing, the 'fight' instinct is actually a lot more relevant and powerful than the 'flee' instinct. In the workplace at least, more and more people, in response to ever-increasing stress levels, are acting out in an aggressive and combative way. Whether a person raises their voice or starts throwing furniture, however, you have to know how to handle the situation effectively. It's also advantageous for business managers and human resource departments – anyone in a counselling position – to know what they can do to prevent conflict in the workplace before it escalates to a violate and potentially dangerous situation.

Although the economic situation is contributing to a general escalation of conflict, it is also worth remembering that certain professions expose workers to particularly high levels of conflict or stress. One study of Australian nurses and their exposure to conflict found that a majority of

respondents (63.5%) had experienced some form of aggression (verbal or physical abuse) in the four working weeks immediately prior to the survey. This is just one example, however it does point to the severity of the broader problem in some sectors.

Organisational consultants in mediation, collaboration and conflict resolution, Reynolds and Kalish (2002), note that managers spend at least 25 per cent of their time resolving workplace conflicts, which has obvious effects on the productivity of both managers and associates, impacting organisational performance.

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

Business managers can take charge to a certain extent and minimise the likelihood of conflict arising over job roles and unpredictable policies. The obvious solution to these two problems being the establishment of clear job roles and responsibilities for each individual within a company, based on their job title and position, and the establishment of clear policies at the office to facilitate clear cut interaction over procedural issues.

It is also helpful, both to manage and minimise conflict, to establish a system for dispute resolution. 'Managing Workplace Conflict' by Van Gramberg offers a detailed study of the alternative disputes resolution (ADR) system in Australia and details the various ADR techniques and the roles played by ADR practitioners in workplace conflict and suggests the importance of working to develop a customised approach.

Since conflict can occur at any level of a business, however, it is also helpful to develop a range of conflict management systems designed to address conflict at the various business levels, including among front line staff, line managers, and the human resource level. Conflict with or relating to company management should be considered of particular concern, since it is the level of the company perhaps most vulnerable to criticism and discord.

In an effort to limit conflict and build unity within the company from the top down, it is worth considering that few actions have a more powerful impact on employee morale or a greater effect on the willingness to work hard, than the expression of gratitude, particularly from those in a senior position. One of the best ways to overcome conflict in the workforce during these economic times is to try to manage it before it becomes an issue, and otherwise deflate it when it occurs by offering positive reinforcements and regular expressions of gratitude to workers.

WHY BUSINESSES NEED TO PREVENT CONFLICT IN THE WORKFORCE

Without sustained motivation and a strong sense of the value of their contributions, many workers are at risk of burn out and raised stress levels. Both of these conditions can promote conflict, either with coworkers, management, or customers, and since the economic

environment is reducing resources and undercutting profits, pressures are extreme.

Unproductive work environments will perpetuate conflict and stress among employees, creating a vicious cycle of escalating stressors. Sustained motivation is crucial during these economic times, primarily to avoid loss of interest and loss of confidence in the company. Management should be particularly conscientious about refining goals, objectives, and policies for the company. Goals and objectives should be realistic and revised to reflect the new demands of the weakened economy.

In the event that conflicts become serious, either in terms of their duration, their severity, or their nature (if they become violent), taking advantage of help services, learning resources or training workshops is likely the best solution to manage conflict and prevent it in the future. ●

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