How to Resolve Workplace Conflicts by Addressing Conflict Expression

Key Concept

Faced with workplace conflicts, attending to how the different parties express themselves — presenting their positions clearly, calmly and honestly or using aggressive language and loud voices, is just one example — can be the key in reaching a resolution.

Idea Summary

Workplace conflicts are, unfortunately, a common and difficult problem for managers. The traditional approach to resolving conflict is to examine the content of the conflict: what are you fighting about, and how can we reach some kind of agreement or resolution about this topic? Past research has focused on helping managers effectively manoeuvre this conversation.

However, new research shows that a more powerful way of managing and resolving workplace conflict is not to focus on the content of the argument, but rather on the expression of the argument. This includes not just the tone and language of what people say, but also the tactics that people employ to express their disagreement (for example, blocking any search for information, saying nothing face-to-face but venting to third parties). Examining such expression helps reveal the intentions of the parties and their openness to finding a resolution to the problem. It also explains the reactions of the parties in the conflict, and how the conflict proceeds in a positive or negative direction.

Expression can be measured along two different dimensions, according to the research: directness and oppositional intensity. Directness involves the clarity with which an opposing view is expressed. In other words, high directness would indicate that both parties express their views without ambiguity or subterfuge: they articulate exactly what they think and why. In many cases, unfortunately, opponents choose the low-directness route. They hint at, rather than explicitly state, their concerns. Or even worse, opponents make no attempt to communicate their
opposition, preferring instead to stay silent or feign acceptance all the while intending to find ways to sabotage the initiative to which they've apparently agreed — the most insidious type of low directness.

The second dimension of expression is oppositional intensity, which refers to the degree of energy or force with which the opposition is expressed. High oppositional intensity is manifested by shouts and threats or such behaviours as deliberate stonewalling, undermining, or dominating of opponents. Issuing ultimatums or making demands are examples of high oppositional intensity.

Low oppositional intensity is manifested through more passive aggressive or defensive behaviours. Low intensity can include positive behaviours — quiet but pointed discussions — or more negative behaviours such as withholding information.

The most productive conflicts will be characterised by a combination of high directness and low oppositional intensity. The two parties clearly exchange their opposing views but are not entrenched in their positions. As a result, they can deliberate and offer counter-arguments. Other combinations of directness and oppositional intensity are not as productive. High directness and high oppositional intensity, for example, is a recipe for entrenched arguments: the two parties make no effort to resolve their differences, preferring instead to simply increase the volume of their opposition.

The way in which one party expresses its opposition generates a similar response from the other party; as a result, conflicts (with the exception of high directness, low intensity debates) escalate into an increasingly negative spiral.

**Business Application**

Stopping the negative spiral of entrenched conflict requires addressing how the opposing parties express their differences. Leaders must change that expression to high-directness and low-intensity debate in which substantive information is communicated clearly and in which both parties are willing to negotiate.

One danger is to perceive the low-intensity disagreements as being less damaging because there are less obvious conflicts; in truth, low directness/low intensity conflicts, where opposing parties use subterfuge and sabotage instead of airing differences honestly, can be as damaging as the more spectacular high-intensity fights.

Encourage parties who disagree to unequivocally express their emotions. It's better to be explicit and honest, as long as the strength of one's emotions does not betray a complete unwillingness to compromise or is not couched as a threat. With all of the information clearly on the table, the two parties can now move in a positive direction, through reflection and understanding, toward finding an agreement.
References


Further Reading and Relevant Resources

Laurie Weingart's profile at Carnegie Mellon University Tepper School of Business
Kristin Behfar's profile at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business
Corinne Bendersky's profile at UCLA Anderson School of Management
Gergana Todorova's profile at University of Miami School of Business Administration
Karen Jehn's profile at University of Melbourne Business School
Darden School of Business Executive Education profile at IEDP
UCLA Anderson School of Management's profile at IEDP
Melbourne Business School - Mt Eliza Executive Education at IEDP

© Copyright IEDP Ideas for Leaders 2015