

Buon, T & Buon, C (*forthcoming book chapter - unedited*) Perspectives on Managing Workplace Conflict. Forthcoming Chapter in *Employee Well-being Support: A Workplace Resource* (2007) Kinder, A, Hughes, R & Cooper Cary (Eds), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd Publisher

Perspectives on Managing Workplace Conflict

Introduction

This chapter explores workplace conflict from an experiential perspective and seeks to show how a reframing of our perception of conflict can help us to create a framework for responding to and managing workplace conflict that is empowering and transformative for individuals and organisations

Perceptions of Workplace Conflict

If asked to describe what constitutes workplace conflict, most of us would initially associate the word 'conflict' with experiences in our present or past working life that were negative, stressful or distressing. Those situations would most likely be characterised by a sense of frustration and powerlessness, and this would be true irrespective of whether we are in the role of a supervisor, manager or team member.

We would no doubt also be able to recall positive experiences of open communication where we felt heard and understood in the process of resolving our conflicts at work. These positive experiences of conflict would be characterised by a sense of shared power, trust and mutual respect, even though we may not always have achieved our preferred outcome.

In this sense, our experience of workplace conflict is not unlike our experience of conflict in our personal and family lives, in that whilst we do have significant and rewarding experiences of being able to work through our conflicts with each other; we still tend to have an

over-riding perception of conflict as something undesirable, negative and difficult to deal with.

The following case study explores the question of whether a workplace that is relatively free of conflict can be regarded an indicator of a functional and healthy workplace and employee well-being.

Case Study 1: The Power of Belief Systems

Alan feels belittled by the way one of his colleagues. Bill always criticises his ideas and input in front of the rest of the department and his line manager at their monthly meetings. He believes that it will only make things worse to say something about it as this will just make him look 'thin-skinned' and weak, neither of which he feels are 'tolerated' in his organisation. He has therefore decided after a few months of hoping that it will just stop, to 'put up with' it even though he can feel his confidence to speak up at meetings is all but gone.

Discussion of Key Issues

Alan's decision to use avoidance as a way of dealing with this situation is underpinned by a number of powerful beliefs.

1. He believes that Bill's actions are belittling.
2. He believes that communicating openly about the situation will make him vulnerable and worsen the situation.
3. He believes that his managers and organisation will not understand or support his concerns.

ScotCoach

Ultimately it is Alan's belief that dealing with the situation would result in a negative conflict and his desire to avoid that conflict that governs how he perceives his options for action. Perhaps even more importantly is the way in which this belief system is also a determinant for how the situation will evolve as it continues to impact on his sense of well-being at work and his ability to perform and make a contribution at work.

In answering the question above, it is clear that in this instance an absence or avoidance of conflict between Alan and Bill is not contributing to the organisation's function or the well-being of its employees. If we go wider than Alan's world view we can also see that there are other factors that are contributing to the evolution of this type of situation.

The Nature of Workplace Conflict

In reality an employee's experience of workplace conflict can be both negative and positive and the factors that contribute to whether it is one or the other or a mixed experience are complex and multifaceted.

Before exploring these factors in more depth it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the levels of conflict or dissonance that tend to occur. These levels are indicative of the degree of internal feeling or emotion about the conflict that is being experienced by one or more of the parties.

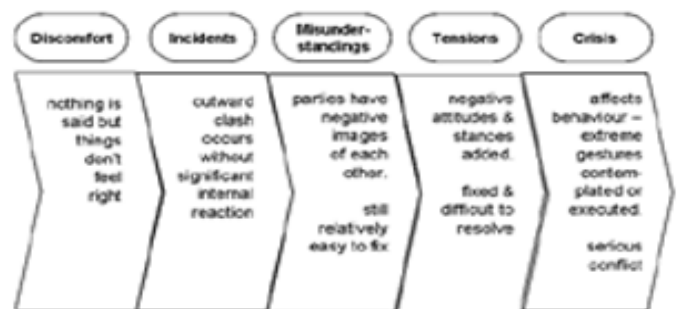
The following diagram (Weeks, 1994) summaries the levels of conflict that can be experienced starting with *discomfort* where nothing overt has occurred but the person affected has a feeling that something is not right. The next level can be described as an *incident* where an outward clash occurs but as yet the person

affected does not feel any significant internal emotional response to the situation.

Once a conflict reaches the next level of *misunderstanding* one or more of the parties to a conflict have begun to hold negative images of the other but it is still relatively easy to resolve this level of conflict through information sharing and open communication. However, when a conflict reaches the level of *tensions* one or more of the parties have started to form fixed beliefs and positions about the other person and it becomes increasingly more difficult to resolve a conflict at this level.

At the final level of *crisis* the conflict may affect the behaviour of one or more of the parties and extreme gestures are contemplated or executed which further erodes trust and the opportunity to restore a healthy working relationship between the parties.

Figure 1: Level of Conflict



(Based on Weeks, 1994)

Clearly not all conflicts start at the lowest level of intensity and move their way up to a crisis as a conflict may stay at one level indefinitely and never escalate or it may de-escalate and improve. Alternately, because of the nature of what has occurred it may start at a very intense level and escalate very quickly into a crisis.

In general terms however, we can describe the way in which a conflict occurs over time as a continuum of conflict as can be seen in the following diagram (Tidwell, 1998). On the vertical axis is the degree of *negotiability* or opportunity to negotiate a resolution and on the horizontal axis is the amount of time that has elapsed with the level of *intensity* increasing over time the longer the conflict has continued to exist. What can be seen is that situations generally become more intense over time and so have a lesser degree of negotiability.

It is also important to appreciate that the point at which a given individual will feel a particular intensity of internal response to a conflict will vary. A conflict situation or issue that appears as trivial or inconsequential to one person may evoke intense feelings of anger, betrayal, injustice or hurt in another person. It is also very common for one party to feel distressed by something that is happening and for the other person to be unaware of this.

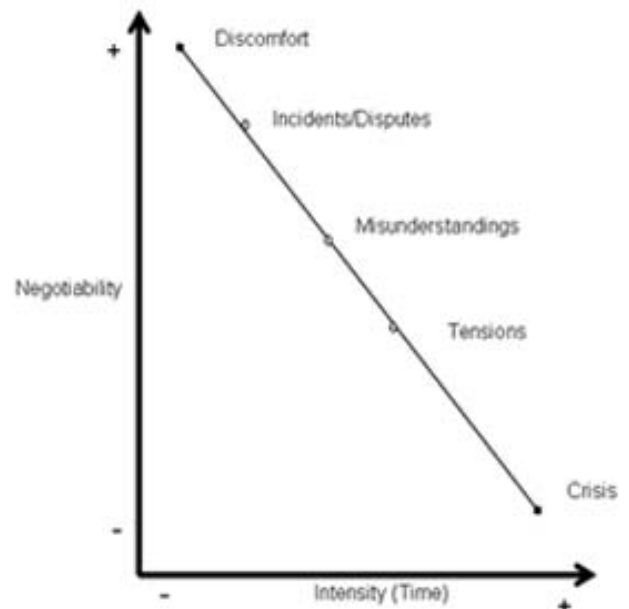
If we return to our case study of Alan and Bill it can be seen that this is what has occurred whereby Alan has not spoken with Bill about the way his behaviour is making him feel and it may well be the case that Bill is completely unaware of the impact his behaviour is having on his colleague.

Whilst such individual responses to a given situation vary greatly, in general terms it is known that situations involving inherent human needs such as individual and group identity, recognition or developmental needs tend to evoke powerful emotions and it is these unmet or unrecognised human needs which underpin intensely felt conflict situations. At the core of such conflicts a person may experience a sense of threat to their

identity and begin to experience significant symptoms of distress or stress.

In any conflict situation there will be elements of both unmet human needs and the material or negotiable issues. As a conflict becomes more intensely felt over time the challenge in creating a resolution is to assess these elements as accurately as possible and then adopt the most appropriate approach that addresses both of these aspects.

Figure 2: Continuum of Conflict



Source: Modified from Tidwell (1988)

Metamorphosis of Conflict

Building on the above idea of the evolution and escalation of conflict over time is the concept of a 'continuum of behaviours'. In Figure 3 it can be seen that there are a whole range of behaviours that may contribute to the evolution of workplace conflict.

In any work group or team such behaviours will always arise and will vary in intensity and duration depending upon; the nature of the conflict, the make-up of the

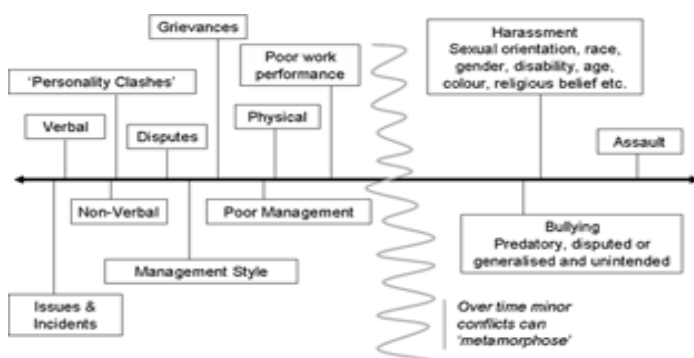
individuals, the collective history of the group or team and the skills and experience of the managers and others intervening in the conflict situation and the wider culture of the organisation.

Whilst a conflict may start at one end of this continuum involving behaviours that are seemingly minor or can reasonably be regarded as just a normal part of day to day working life, minor conflict situations have the potential to change or 'metamorphose' (Fortado, 2001) into far more serious conflicts involving behaviours such as bullying or harassment and acts of retaliation, sabotage, physical assault or violence.

If a conflict is not handled through effective early intervention or is mishandled then the potential for this type of metamorphosis to occur increases especially where the conflict centres on unmet human needs and a high level of emotional intensity for one or more of the individuals is present.

In the diagram a wavy line is shown indicating that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to pinpoint or predict the exact point at which this change will occur. Case Study 2 further explores this phenomenon.

Figure 3: Continuum of Behaviour



Source: Authors

Case Study 2: Metamorphosis of Conflict

Claire was part of a team of specialist assessors working in a large insurance company. She had been in the job for a couple of years and was on her way to becoming a senior assessor. Until then she needed to collaborate still very closely with her colleagues in order to have certain reports signed off before they could be completed. Claire was very committed to her work but had a tendency to divert from company procedures and was not consistent in the way in which she recorded her work. The team of assessors were a very tight-knit group at work and socially but Claire was never really brought into the social group as she was seen to be a bit snobbish and often made remarks about politics or other topical issues around the lunch table that the rest of the group did not agree with and found off-putting.

Claire's supervisor, Stefan was very close to the rest of his team and also had a problem warming to Claire and did not really like her. Claire felt increasingly excluded from the group and when Stefan or the other team members needed to speak with Claire about her work performance they were met by very emotional and defensive responses as Claire perceived this type of monitoring of her work as a form of persecution. Eventually Claire's work performance began to suffer further as she was feeling distressed more often at work.

When things became too distressing Claire went off on stress leave and brought a formal grievance of bullying and victimisation against her supervisor and other team members. After a formal investigation the grievance was not upheld and Claire took the matter to the appeal stage where once again it was not upheld. She did not return from sick leave and eventually made a claim of constructive dismissal which resulted in a compromise agreement before it went to a Tribunal hearing.

Discussion of Key Issues

The factors that contributed to the way in which this relatively minor conflict changed or metamorphosed into a grievance of bullying can be summarised as follows:

1. Claire was not finding it easy to be accepted by the group.
2. Claire had some issues with her work performance that needed to be addressed by her supervisor.
3. Stefan and the team did not like Claire and did not feel comfortable letting her into their social group.
4. When the work performance issues were raised with Claire she over-reacted as she was feeling distressed about her sense of exclusion from the group.
5. Claire's over-reaction reinforced the group's belief that Claire was a 'difficult' person to work with.
6. Stefan was unable to maintain appropriate boundaries between his friendship with colleagues and his role as a line manager and so did not provide an equal level of support to Claire.

The dynamic in this team is clearly a very important factor underlying the way in which this conflict escalated into a formal grievance.

For Claire what started as a sense of not fitting in with and being accepted by the group eventually metamorphosed into a much more powerful sense of being victimised and excluded. In this sense her identity within the group was at stake and it is this powerful

ScotCoach

Helping organisations empower their people to grow

unmet human need which intensified and escalated the conflict for her. For the group, their belief that Claire was not a good fit within their team created a sense of threat to the established group identity and so they saw it as a failure on Claire's part to do what was needed to 'fit in' as opposed to anything they were saying or doing that prevented her from being a part of the group.

In addition, the way in which the situation was handled by the supervisor did nothing to change this dynamic or to prevent the escalation of the conflict within the team as Stefan was a part of that same group dynamic. In all likelihood, had he been able to maintain appropriate boundaries and provide support to all of his team members and manage Claire's work performance appropriately, this team would have learnt some valuable lessons about a diversity of approaches and personalities within a team and Claire would not have lost her job.

Responses to Conflict

A Neutral or Functional Perception of Conflict

If we return to the opening discussion about our predominantly negative perception of conflict it is suggested that in order to respond more effectively to conflict we need to re-frame our definition of workplace conflict so that it is neither negative nor positive but neutral. Workplace conflict is instead viewed as an outgrowth of diversity and differences and is a natural process of communication (Weeks, 1994).

In accepting the inherently neutral nature of conflict we can then start to move the focus away from what is often experienced as a disempowering pathology at the core of most conflicts. We can also stop investing energy in avoiding the potential negative consequences

of entering into conflict with others or in intervening in a conflict and instead focus on how we **can** respond effectively and positively to those conflicts both at an individual and organisational level.

In this sense it is not the conflict in and of itself that is negative but the negative or positive aspects of certain behaviours and the way in which we respond to those behaviours that determines whether that conflict is a constructive or negative experience.

The key question then is whether or not the conflict being experienced can be seen as functional or dysfunctional. In other words what can this conflict situation tell me about myself, my working relationships, my team or my organisation?

Whilst the answer to this question is ultimately subjective and value laden it is suggested that in asking it of ourselves and each other we begin to improve our level of self awareness and therefore our capacity to respond more effectively.

Resources for Responding to Conflict

An individual's or organisation's capacity to respond effectively and positively to conflict is dependent upon the internal personal and organisational resources available to create and support that response.

The following list provides a brief overview of some of the key resources that are utilised in response to workplace conflict.

- Self Awareness
- Resilience
- Social and Interpersonal Skills
- Natural Style of Handling Conflict
- Communication Processes

- Third Party Interventions
- Policies and Procedures
- Management Intervention
- Training, Development and Coaching
- First Contact or Harassment Contact Schemes
- Employee Assistance or Welfare Support
- Occupational Health Units or Services

A Framework for Managing Workplace Conflict

Clearly there is no one correct way to respond to all workplace conflict as each conflict situation will present its own unique set of issues and challenges. There must then be an ability to be flexible and adaptable if our responses and interventions are going to be consistently effective. Whilst there are no guaranteed solutions it is not enough however just to get by on our intuition and pragmatism as this will undoubtedly lead us into great difficulties. We therefore need a framework within which we can discover what works.

In arriving at a framework for how to respond to and manage workplace conflict the following elements need to be considered.

Power Imbalance and Organisational Due Process

Since October 2002 employers in the UK have had to put in place and follow minimum statutory grievance and disciplinary procedures. In our view irrespective of the legal requirement to comply with this legislation, it is essential to have in place a robust and meaningful set of complaint or grievance handling procedures as this forms the baseline for the way in which organisational due process is communicated and managed within an organisation.

Underpinning the need for this is the fact that the employment relationship has an inherent power imbalance and so all employees need to know that natural justice is enshrined in an organisation's policies and procedures. For these procedures to be effective they must be; institutionalised, perceived as equitable, easy to use, visible and well known, consistently applied to all and demonstrate in practice that employee rights will be upheld and acted upon (Ewing, 1977).

In addition, it is our recommendation that a separate and simplified complaints procedure be implemented for complaints dealing with allegations of bullying and harassment so that the employees involved are not compelled to discuss distressing aspects of the complaint at numerous stages of a grievance procedure before reaching a satisfactory conclusion.

Informal Communication and Problem Solving Processes

Most grievance procedures will contain an informal stage, however in our experience a minority of organisations provide any indication as to how this informal stage should work and whilst more employers are beginning to introduce some form of workplace mediation or informal processes for resolving conflict before it progresses to a formal grievance, this is not yet recognised as a mainstream approach.

In the face of an increasing number of protected categories of employment rights and in an effort to get it right and avoid potential risks many managers may feel lacking in confidence or skills to even attempt to intervene in workplace conflict and so would rather have the matter dealt with on a formal basis. The danger is that this response to the legislative

framework will lead to an over-reliance on a 'compliance approach' in managing workplace conflict

However the most effective way of preventing the incidence and escalation of conflict and in empowering employees to find their own solutions is to develop and utilise good informal and problem solving processes and interpersonal process skills. We need to get past the fear of 'walking on eggshells' with respect to our differences with each other at work and past the fear of making a mistake as managers and accept that being good at responding to conflict means being open to learning about ourselves and our organisations.

It also means being given the opportunity to assess our own strengths, weaknesses and competencies and identify areas for change within our organisations. We have to have the opportunity to make judgement calls and learn what works and so become good self-managers and interveners in conflict.

Conclusion

Even where an organisation has every resource available to it and good procedures for managing conflict and can say that they have ticked every box; if they do not have 'empowering cultural practices' (Gershon, 2006) within their organisation then they will still feel frustrated in their efforts to bring about the desired change in behaviour and find lasting solutions.

This means that an organization must work proactively at creating an environment within which people feel encouraged to take responsibility for creating solutions and feel safe enough to communicate openly about what the real issues are. It must also be a place where individuals are encouraged to learn and grow through

conflict and so feel empowered to transform their problems into a way forward.

Summary of the Framework

1. Assess the situation: what is the nature of the conflict? Are there any unmet human needs involved? How much negotiability is there?
2. Understand the social, structural and statutory influences and implications.
3. Assess the response to the conflict:
 - a. Is the conflict functional?
 - b. What are the sources/causes?
 - c. Do the conditions exist for resolution: opportunity, capacity, willingness?
 - d. What are the best methods for handling the conflict? Informal or formal?
 - e. Implement and then review the resolution or agreed approach.
4. Avoid counselling employees about personal problems that are impacting on work performance or contributing to the conflict: refer them on.
5. Make extensive use of informal communication, problem solving processes and interpersonal process skills.
6. Utilise specific grievance or complaints procedures where appropriate but do not over-rely on a compliance approach.
7. Ensure that natural justice and due process are built into and observed in every process and intervention that is used.

8. Observe appropriate boundaries such as confidentiality and impartiality.
9. Underpin everything with empowering cultural practices.

References

- Ewing, D.W. (1977). *Freedom Inside the Organisation: Bringing Civil Liberties to the Workplace*. New York: Dutton.
- Fortado, B (2001). The Metamorphosis of Workplace Conflict, *Human Relations*, Volume 54, 9. The Tavistock Institute, SAGE Publications.
- Gershon, D. (2006). *Forthcoming*. The Practice of Empowerment in Devane, T and
- Holman, P (2006) *The Change Handbook*, 2nd Edition, Berrett Koehler, San Francisco, CA
- Tidwell, A, C. (1998). *Conflict Resolved?* Pinter: London.
- Weeks, D. (1994.) *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution*. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putman, New York NY

© ScotCoach 2007 www.scotcoach.com