Conflict Management Competencies in the Workplace
Craig E. Runde

Most people view conflict as something negative to be avoided. When asked, they readily agree that this approach rarely works and usually leads to unproductive outcomes. So what does it take to address conflict competently? Conflict management involves a complex range of skills that are usually not inborn—but that can be learned.

THE VALUE OF MANAGING CONFLICT EFFECTIVELY
If cost savings are a goal, then improving the management of conflict can play a key role. Significant savings can come from a variety of sources. A number of studies have found that managers spend 30-70% of their time dealing with conflicts. Significant turnover can be linked to unmanaged conflict. Both absenteeism and presenteeism can rise when conflicts are not managed well. Grievances, complaints, lawsuits, vandalism, and even violence can be linked to poorly managed conflict, and all of these can increase cost and decrease productivity.

WHAT’S IN IT FOR YOU
Many people have talent and drive. What they may lack are the conflict-management skills that can make the difference between success and failure. Obtaining and improving effective conflict-management skills can help you as you advance within an organization and enable you to serve as a good role model.

BENEFITS OF CONFLICT
When conflict is managed well, it can lead to greater creativity and innovation, higher-quality decision-making, and improved implementation of ideas. The creativity and innovation come from more robust discussions where one idea leads to another, and the process begets new and better solutions.

These same discussions can allow for more rigorous vetting of ideas, which leads to better decisions. When people are actively involved in the discussions, they feel like they have been part of the solution and are more willing to participate in the implementation of decisions even when they are not their preferred outcomes.

Adapted from an article by Craig E. Runde of Conflict Dynamics, http://www.conflictdynamics.org/files/employmentrelations.pdf

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES
Leadership competencies contribute to improved performance. Conflict management competencies enable people to address inevitable conflicts in a manner that produces better outcomes and improved relationships.

Individual conflict management competencies involve enhanced self-awareness, emotional intelligence, the use of constructive communication behaviors, and knowing when to use additional resources.

The individual conflict management competencies model envisions people being able to:
- cool down to manage emotions
- slow down and reflect on what is happening for themselves and the others and then
- engage constructively with the other person to resolve the problem.

Cool-Down Phase
The cool-down phase allows people to regain emotional balance before engaging with the other person. Without such balance, it becomes too easy to engage in fight-or-flight behaviors that can escalate the situation by causing the other person to react negatively.

Conflict is replete with emotion. It is difficult to respond effectively when one is under the grip of negative emotions. They drive us to react in destructive ways that escalate conflict by causing further negative reactions from others involved in the conflict. As a consequence, understanding hot buttons and working on emotional self-regulation techniques becomes a critical component of conflict management competencies.

When people become more aware of those hot buttons that trigger negative reactions, they become less susceptible to being blind-sided in conflict. Reflecting on the values underlying hot buttons helps bring clarity about why certain behaviors can upset us. This tends to lessen the intensity of the hot button in future encounters. The hot-button reactions do not go away completely, but rather they become more manageable.

Slow Down + Reflect Phase
Conflict can be a chaotic jumble of thoughts and feelings. Clarity is often lacking, and confusion holds sway. When this happens, slowing down and reflecting before rushing to resolve the problem can prove very effective.
Slowing down provides time and space to allow emotions to calm. As balance is regained, it becomes easier to gain insight into the dynamics in play in the conflict.

Reflection clarifies conflict boundaries—helping show who is involved, what their interests are, and whether their interests are being taken into account. It also helps provide a deeper understanding of one’s own experience of the conflict which can help in preparing for a conversation with others involved in it. The reflection allows one to explore how he or she is thinking about the situation and what data are being relied on to support his or her interpretation. It also enables the person to better understand his or her feelings and the desired goal or objective for the situation.

**ENGAGE CONSTRUCTIVELY PHASE**

At this point, it becomes possible to successfully engage constructively in problem-solving efforts with the other person. This requires the use of a number of constructive communications techniques that foster understanding by:

- promoting good listening and speaking to better understand the conflict from different perspectives
- development and vetting of creative solutions
- effective implementation of the solutions.

**DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS**

From a behavioral approach, conflict management competencies involves reducing one’s use of destructive behaviors and increasing reliance on constructive ones.

Destructive behaviors tend to fall into two categories—active and passive:

- Active destructive behaviors include actions like trying to win at all costs, displaying anger, demeaning others, and retaliating.
- Passive destructive behaviors include actions like avoiding and giving in.

Fear underlies many destructive behaviors, and when destructive behaviors are used, they can provoke the other person to respond in kind and lead to a retaliatory spiral. It is very important to keep the use of these behaviors to a minimum, and the best way to do this is to substitute constructive behaviors.

**CONSTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS**

Constructive behaviors can also be viewed as active—involving overt behaviors—or passive—either withholding an action or choosing to do something internally.

- Active behaviors, such as reaching out, perspective taking, listening for understanding, expressing emotions, and creating solutions—tend to be highly correlated with leadership effectiveness.
- Passive behaviors include actions reflecting on the pros and cons of different solutions, delaying
responses when emotionally upset, and remaining flexible and adaptive to make the best out of a resolution.

**WORTH THE RISK**
People generally admit that they talk less when conflict occurs, and that this complicates efforts to find solutions. Reaching out to other people can feel risky because they could easily respond with denials and finger pointing. Yet, leaders know that resolving conflict is worth the risk of a rebuff because unaddressed problems tend to fester and become more difficult over time.

**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES SKILLS**
Managing conflict involves both talking and listening. Of the two functions, listening is often the more important and, for most people, more difficult. Trying to understand another person takes effort and can be challenging, especially when you feel you are right and the other person is wrong. As a result, two actions, perspective taking and listening for understanding, become critical conflict-resolution skills.

**Perspective taking** involves trying to imagine what the other person is thinking and feeling about a situation. Putting yourself into another person’s shoes can lead to new understanding. When this is coupled with listening to the other person, it can also help lessen tensions.

When you are able to demonstrate to the other person that you have actually understood his or her point, the other person’s anger may be defused even if you both still disagree.

In addition to listening to others, it is also important to be able to share your own thoughts and feelings with another person with whom you are having a conflict. People are typically comfortable sharing their thoughts but less so sharing their emotions. **Sharing emotions** is also important, though, because they can have a profound effect on conflicts. If someone represses his or her emotions, an important set of information is withheld from the other person. It can also cause the build-up of tension in the person who is upset, which in turn can lead to them using destructive behaviors as the tensions mount.

Once both parties have shared their perspectives on the conflict and have talked about what they want out of it, it becomes possible to develop and **vet possible solutions**. It is critical that solutions address the wants of both people. One-sided outcomes are rarely sustainable and set the stage for future conflicts stoked by dissatisfaction with earlier outcomes.

**CREATING THE RIGHT CLIMATE**
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Creating conflict management-competent organizations requires support from leaders in developing norms for dealing with conflict as well as in showing the way by modeling constructive engagement and mentoring and coaching others in the use of such processes when dealing with problems. A point can be reached where effective conflict-management processes begin to enhance creativity, promote productivity, and improve workplace morale. Differences are valued rather than feared. Open and honest discussions are encouraged and leveraged to obtain better results. Conflict management competencies becomes a highly valued asset.

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