

CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

An employee "decks" his supervisor on the workshop floor after being crudely reprimanded. The rest of the team unite in support of the employee and against the supervisor who is seen as typical of an abusive style of management.

A department within an educational institution breaks down as a functional team due to varying responses to a scarcity of staff and other resources. Some members work harder to meet these new demands; others think them downright unreasonable and adopt something of a 'work to rule' approach. These groupings harden into factions each with its strident champion. A climate of blame and bitterness emerges. The row begins to spill over into other departments. There is concern by senior leaders that the reputation of the institution may be affected.

A bitter disagreement between an employee and his shift supervisor has polarised the rest of the shift. As a result the productivity of this shift has declined to the extent that other shifts have become resentful. The considerable backlog of work that has to be made up because of the dysfunctional shift is affecting the ability of other shifts to meet their production targets.

We were involved in these situations and many others like them. Each of these examples is a conflict which reached an advanced and costly stage. Under new legislation these matters are appearing before the Courts more and more frequently.

Wherever people live and work together there will be tensions and disagreements. Whilst some are relatively minor skirmishes which soon blow over; others become entrenched and simmer away for years. A few escalate and explode into serious strife.

Constructive conflict

Not all conflict is bad. Constructive conflict can enhance problem solving, and decision making and reduce tension by 'clearing the air'. Constructive conflict tends to be "playing the ball" - focussed on tasks and issues. Conflict which "plays the man" - where the focus is personal and abusive, tend to be destructive.

Destructive conflict

Destructive conflict can result in heavy organisational and personal costs. A major trauma, expensive litigation, the disabling of a work group as an effective unit, are three examples of its more spectacular results. Others, still damaging are perhaps less obvious - a climate of mistrust and suspicion, a shift of focus from work goals to infighting, or the loss of valued staff.

The sources of conflict

Destructive conflict arises from two major sources: the organisational context, and individual factors. There is often a tendency to see conflict as an individual issue when in fact the major cause is systemic. In this paper, nine organisational factors which can trigger and escalate conflict are listed, briefly described, and instanced. Six known individual factors are also cited.

Managing or resolving conflict

Where it is necessary to manage or resolve a conflict the first step is to be clear about its origins and nature. A set of questions is proposed to assist this diagnosis.

Specific intervention strategies are listed under the rubrics of:

- (A) **Contextual:** Examples of systemic changes are provided.
- (B) **Third party interventions:** Focussing in particular on the role of mediation
- (C) **Individual level interventions:** In which a preventative developmental approach is stressed.

The need for early intervention

Because of the tendency of destructive conflict to escalate into increasingly severe forms, early intervention can lower risk exposure and prevent the need for later invasive and costly interventions.

To explore in greater detail contact:

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