



We've all heard that conflict is a natural dividend of interaction and progress in any organization, but it sure can be a pain in the posterior. As a consultant that has acted as a "toxic handler" for organizations that have had incredible levels of conflict, I still find it hard to grasp the amount of inappropriately addressed conflict that tears organizations and employees apart. Over the past five years, I have learned a few things about conflict within organizations, and I would like to pass them along. First, a few observations & warnings:

- Observation: Conflict wears and ultimately tears the fabric of the organization. No surprise here, but weaving that fabric is really everybody's responsibility. However, employees look to management, a "boss", a supervisor, or the owner and wonder why he or she can't "do something" about the situation. Warning: The "boss" has not yet been born that can "make" employees behave or "solve" adult conflict by themselves.

- Observation: Conflict affects customer service. In the organizations that I have assisted, the conflict definitely affected service and consumers. We all know that more regular clients pick up subtle cues among employees and management regarding who respects who, who plays well with others, etc. Warning: Organizations that have excessive conflict will also spend too much money on staff issues, lower productivity and more severe and more production/service time lost.

- Observation: Conflict within organizations wastes human capital. A fairly large portion of many organization's expenditures are in wages, salaries and benefits. In specific, some labor-intensive organizations have very little other capital to work with. Warning: Unaddressed and unmanaged adult conflict slowly poisons the climate, the employees and future employees for years to come.

- Observation: Managers are keenly aware that conflict exists, but don't know what to do about it. I taught Leadership courses at the graduate level for five years. Our course work included 60 graduate credits leading to certification, and only one course contained conflict-reducing strategies and methods as a part of the curriculum. Warning: Most leaders lack training & skills to manage conflict in organizations. They may inappropriately use hands-off strategies, use heavy-handed authoritarian responses, or schedule "Personality Indicator" assessments for all staff or try "teambuilding". Wrong.



I believe that most organizational conflict is perpetuated because employees and management do not have the experience or perspective to accurately diagnose conflict within the organization. However, in the instances where management and employees actually know the cause of the conflict, they prescribe inappropriate activities to reduce the conflict. What follows is a system that identifies data collection methods, categorizes conflict causes in organizations and suggests possible proven remedies. Each of the remedies can be implemented at little or no cost; it has been my experience that conflict within organizations cannot be remediated through commercially personality indicator tests, group assessments, or commercially available resources.

Data Collection

_____ Here is the simplest method that I know of to collect data from employees and management regarding conflict in their workplace. The same questions can be posed to clients and suppliers to solicit additional data if needed. Keep it simple and type the following into a one-page survey and send out on paper or in e-mail format:

Acme Corporation

Organizational Climate Survey - March, 2000

Your ideas about our organization will provide information that will help improve services to our customers and all of our employees. Please take a minute to answer the questions and return in the attached envelope, fax to (number) or e-mail to (address). All answers will be kept anonymous. All results will be shared with all employees and management. Thanks for your help!

- 1) What two things do we do well at Acme?
- 2) What is the single biggest item that needs to be improved?
- 3) What would you suggest to improve our organizational climate?

Have all surveys returned to an outside party by providing that party's address on the attached envelopes, their fax number or their e-mail address. This will dramatically improve the return rate, and will increase the amount of text and quality of answers provided.

Data Analysis

_____ The data analysis will be easier than you ever imagined. You will be stunned at the amount of information that will be provided - not complaining, just very clear descriptions of the situation as the respondents see it. Do not bother to tally



the results or use statistical analyses; these are qualitative results. Just read and learn.

Diagnosis & Prescription

Cause #1: Lack of, or vague focus. This data will contain responses that indicate too much variability regarding the primary vision or mission for the organization. This may occur after the removal of a “harder” leader and replacing him or her with a “softer” personnel/organizational development type of leader (or vice versa). An example of a lack of focus would be the new company unit that has been formed by throwing together employees from within two previously separate sections without spending at least a short amount of time developing new shared beliefs and expectations.

Prescription: Revisit/develop vision, mission, and goals. Employees and management need to review or develop a new vision and mission, and then need to work together to identify the goals and work necessary to deliver that mission. Too many of us have been held captive in vision and mission sessions that lasted all day or two days, and I personally would rather poke a pencil in my eye than do that again. Do not hire a consultant to lead your group through a mission or vision setting session if they cannot get you through the entire vision/mission brouhaha in less than three hours.

Cause #2: Unaligned/misaligned beliefs & procedures. This type of data will illustrate the fact that not all managers and employees are not in agreement with “what we are supposed to do” and “what we actually do”. An example of this was a junior high school that called me in after a staff member was savagely beat up by a student. That event caused staff to splinter (to say the least) regarding how staff and administration should handle the situation and hopefully, prevent future incidents. Some staff wanted Marshall Law to be enacted with swift, public punishments to the infractors. Other staff believed that the behavior management policies in existence were effective, and that the attack was unfortunate and had a very remote chance of being repeated, and that changes to the behavior policies could not prevent that level of attack. The splintering of the staff, and the lack of administrative response caused teams of staff to freelance and behavior



This may be the most dangerous and hard to resolve conflict within any organization. I once had a survey returned with four single-spaced pages attached documenting the respondent's pain. This person identified the pain inflicted by other employees that had formed and associated only in cliques, (verbally) stabbed other employees in the back, and caused this 20-year veteran to feel fear and unwelcome inside the organization.

This conflict can be addressed through an open meeting where the following events occur:

1) Break up into groups of four by having participants select a card from a deck and match cards (subtract or add cards to match the number of employees and managers in the unit, but only let four into each small group).

2) Give the small groups 10 minutes to "Identify how you want all employees in this organization to treat each other", and to write down their answers.

3) Ask each group to read off their answers. A writer at the head of the room should write down all groups' answers as they are read, and ask subsequent to avoid reading duplicate statements.

4) Hand out three, one-inch adhesive dots (available from office supply stores) to each participant and direct them to place the dots on the statements that most accurately reflect their individual beliefs. Participants can use all three dots on one statement, vote for a statement with two dots, or place one dots on each of three statements.

5) Tally up votes per statement, read them to staff and ask for discussion. Copy the statements and insert them as a header on staff meeting agendas and other written communication.

6) Keep the momentum. Publicly verbally identify instances and examples of successful demonstration of the chosen behaviors. Ask employees to also reinforce others that use the prioritized behaviors.

The above method should also be repeated using the prompt "Identify how you want other employees to act when conflict arises in our organization". This provides a guide for desirable behavior during difficult times.

The above strategies will not cause the most belligerent, bullying, inappropriate employees to immediately improve their behavior, but it will clearly identify that the overwhelming majority within the organization have healthy expectations and that the majority recognize those behaviors when they see them. That knowledge frequently provides that majority of employees the courage to demonstrate healthy behaviors during conflict.



Summary

The text above illustrates a method to differentiate diagnoses regarding organizational conflict and a set of more accurate prescriptions than are typically administered. I believe that most managers and employees can model and teach effective problem-solving and personal responsibility skills to staff, and that similar teaching and guided instruction are required for employees to identify causes, attempt new behaviors, and break through to a healthier way of working through adult conflict. Staff members' first steps will prove difficult, and remediating adult conflict in will require their ongoing efforts. Those of you that attempt to improve your organizations by helping employees manage and solve their conflict will be providing a very needed service to your colleagues and customers.