

Conflict Resolution Part I

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Conflict! It exists everywhere! But, what is conflict? Is it a negative situation or a disagreement that occurs between people? Does conflict drain have to be draining? Can conflict be positive? Conflict does exist everywhere. Conflict is caused by a change in energy. A definition so simple that we can then understand that conflict can be negative yet it can also be very positive. When we change the way we look at a problem we can be energized by the options and instead of drained by the task. In most environments, conflict is draining. It decreases productivity, morale and creates hostility as people attempt to avoid being the target.

Working with a variety of clients, I am called to work with people who are not working well together. My skills and expertise in conflict resolution, dealing with aggressive individuals, clinical skills etc., allow me to get behind the facade. Conflicts that are negative typically seek out a person who can be blamed. For most conflict to exist, someone becomes the target or victim. As sad as it is the reality is that there are people in this world who are unhappy if people get along and if things go smoothly. These individuals usually subconsciously seek to create trouble by identifying a person that has habits or qualities that they do not like. The target then becomes the focus of all the problems allowing the person who enjoys conflict to have a continuous statement of discontentment, which they do not have to be responsible for. It is sad and in many ways sick, but it is a reality.

Negative Conflicts

Negative conflicts such as the one mentioned above are very draining. The person who wants the conflict to exist spends a great deal of time and energy making sure that the focus remains on the target. Meetings and more meetings are held to discuss how the target can get along better with peers, when the person who I call the monkey grinder is sitting back very content. (I refer to the person stirring up trouble as a monkey grinder, because they get everyone to dance around trying to figure out how to solve a problem that they created. For them it is very entertaining.) The target or victim responds as expected, this person is defensive and usually has just enough underlying personality traits to help them play the role of the martyr and is generally not a person that fits well with peers to start with, so they are accustomed to this position and sometimes don't even see that they are being victimized. The cycle begins with the victim feeding into the plot of the monkey grinder and then everyone dances around trying to make it all better.

If you are reading this and saying yes, Cindy we get it! We have the problem in our office! How do we fix it? Careful, all the TQM and Six Sigma or other quality improvement techniques do not fully apply here. These are people and quick fixes, which are permitted in a quality improvement setting; do not work with these situations. Chances are you already know this because some quick fixes have been tried. Including things like ignoring the individual that stirs up the problem, attempting to play nice, when it is not genuinely a part of what the participants want to do.

Where to Start

So where does one start. Usually with an outside facilitator or consultant. This person has an objective view of the people and is seen by the people involved to be objective. The facilitator should have knowledge in human resources, so as to not break any laws or confidentiality. It is the

responsibility of the facilitator to guide the members through a process that will help them to reveal the real issues and to take ownership of their behaviors. This means creating an atmosphere that is safe enough for people to speak openly and honestly about what is happening. When I work with groups experiencing this type of behavior, I have to realize that many people will play nice, while I am around. They will share the talk, but don't want to walk the walk. They know how to say all the right things, but have no intention of applying it. Because if they apply the skills they need to apply, then people may get along and the fun stops. People may even notice this individual's incompet

Address the Real Problem

Let's start to address the problem. Identifying that a problem exists is the first step. As basic as this is, it can take more than one session to start to get to the issues out on the table. Realize that this is uncomfortable and almost everyone involved will make attempts to skirt the issue. This is typically done by discussing subjects or issues that are not the core problem, but which can mask or divert attention. Luckily, a skilled facilitator sees that these are items that need to be fixed and can be a quick fix, thus removing them from the table and returning the focus to the problem.

Listen to the Issues Objectively

Listen to the problems discussed, but listen without hearing names. Listen to the problem that is stated. Is it a communication problem? What is it about the communication that gets people upset? Is it a lack of communication or is it disrespect in how people communicate with one another? Review their examples to gain clarity on what you see the problem to be.

Clarify the Issues

Clarify the problems that they have brought up. It is important that the group have consensus and understanding about the issues and that they accept that these issues would still exist even without the victim or target. Clarity increases ownership and is the first step in moving people beyond airing dirty laundry. In other words, it is how we begin to end the Ain't It Awful session and see what can be done to make things better.

Conflicts don't happen over night nor do they go away over night. It takes time. Remember that at the root of every conflict lies the seed to its solution. This means that people cannot complain unless they have an idea of how to make it better. In the next newsletter, we will continue to work on resolving issues that make work unproductive and increase poor morale.