

A nine-step process for resolving workplace conflict

By Adriaan Groenewald

Workplace conflict is a time-consuming and costly problem that can have a severe impact on the bottom line. Despite this, many top leaders lack the ability to confront softer issues such as employee relationships in their organisations. ADRIAAN GROENEWALD, MD of Moditure Consulting, a company focused on generating profitable leaders and employees in commerce and civic society, says the inability to promote effective and constructive communication between staff members can defocus a company and result in an unproductive workforce. Here he looks at nine simple steps for resolving conflict and tackling relationship issues.

Workplace relationship problems can arise as the result of clashing personalities, miscommunication, perceived backbiting, negative politics, or a perception of hidden agendas. These factors create bad relations between people, and are generally the result of not following proper communication models, or of grudges built from the outset of a relationship where initial problems were not addressed.

Many leaders prefer to avoid relationship issues because they shy away from conflict, or they do not trust a model or process that will help confront issues. However, one of the toughest aspects of leadership is the ability to deal with people issues.

Conflict in the workplace is generally the result of serious disagreement over needs or goals, and can result in behaviours such as gossip, avoidance, verbal abuse, passive/aggressive communication, and hostility. This can in turn lead to a drop in productivity, a focus on problems rather than solutions, and a slump in creativity and innovation.

While tensions and misunderstandings are normal and inevitable, if left unresolved they result in hostility, stress and wasted resources.

Finding a workable solution to workplace conflict involves the following steps:

1. Once you have been made aware of a relationship problem, call a meeting with the people concerned, and define the situation as factually as possible. At this initial stage, it is usually difficult to define facts, so keep things as simple as possible, for example - 'Relationship between Sanjay and Hazel'. Ensure that there is no judgment or emotion on your part. For example ideally you should avoid defining the situation as - 'Bad relationship between Sanjay and Hazel'. At all costs avoid the "this is absolute nonsense" approach, unless you have in fact implemented the process below and still there is no profitable movement forward.
2. Confront the possible negative issues in the relationship. Find out the problems and constraints the two people involved are dealing with. Let them list their problems, all the time emphasising that you are talking about "possible" negatives. John may feel that Sarah does not greet him each morning, but this may be merely a perception, so do not encourage either person to defend or judge actions, although you may ask for clarification where necessary. Remember that people are scared of conflict in general and do not know how to handle it. Do not look for solutions at this stage.
3. Encourage both people to look at the possible positive sides to their relationship. People have a tendency to treat perceptions as reality. Try to persuade both of them to identify the constructive aspects of their daily dealings with one another. Ask them what works. If they do not process the negative aspects of the relationship, both parties will continue to fixate on them. By discussing the positives, you now move a few steps closer to finding out what they are looking for from the relationship. At this stage you can begin to look for possible solutions to their problems, but without asking for any form of commitment yet. Brainstorm the possibilities.
4. Once you have looked at various options, you can start gaining greater commitment from them. Look at generating and then integrating positive aspirations in order to begin creating motivation on their part. Ask them what they are ideally looking for in the relationship. What do they want? What would they commit to? Once they have articulated that, ask them why. In this way, you will be drilling down to what they are really seeking from the relationship, while gaining deeper insight into who they are.
5. It's now time to generate directions (strategies) in order to achieve the listed aspirations. List your combined plans, actions, objectives and supporting goals. Discuss how you are going to get there. Go

back and address the negatives now that you know what the two people want. Encourage them to distinguish between real and perceived negatives. Move them from "you never listen to me" to "I know you do listen to me sometimes". Put directions in place to address those attitudes. Help them to focus on the positives and commit to them.

6. Set up a supporting structure (resources, system) to accomplish the aspirations and selected directions. Without this structure no idea can move forward. This may simply be a regular scheduled meeting to follow up on actions.

7. Measure the cost of non-compliance (adherence). This means ensuring that they are aware of the cost of not following the solution/s (direction and structure) to the problem, and consequently doing whatever is necessary to get the ship back on course. Ask them what course of action would be necessary should these cost factors arise. What would be the impact on the company if the current discussion does not solve any of the issues? Talk about negativity, loss of productivity, and the possible impact on the company if they do not resolve their dispute. They must own the possible positive outcome as well as the possible negative outcome, so let them do most of the talking.

8. Decide when and how you are going to evaluate and re-evaluate the decisions taken and the progress that may or may not have been made. Hold them accountable!

9. Summarise your discussions up to this point. Reiterate the positive aspirations. Remind both parties what it is that they want, and what the company is expecting from them. In other words ensure that you end off on a positive note.

The ability to manage conflict is a critical skill in the workplace, and has been identified as a core competency for managers and leaders at all levels. It is ironic, therefore, that companies hesitate to invest time and money in improving employees' conflict management abilities when the cost of conflict in financial and other terms can be enormous.

About Moditure

Leadership consulting firm Moditure specialises in developing profitable leaders and employees in commerce and civic society through the integration of three universal principles: motivation, direction and structure. This is achieved by a focus on the universal "How Formula" needed to implement these three principles.

The company has developed several models around these principles. Tested in various leadership, organisational and personal environments, these models are designed to cultivate profitable leaders, and empower leaders and staff at all levels to manage their attitudes and feelings.

Moditure MD Adriaan Groenewald has co-authored and published the *"CEO Leadership Handbook"*, which studies prominent South African figures such as former president Nelson Mandela, Pick 'n Pay CEO Sean Summers, Wiphold CEO Louisa Mojela, and JSE CEO Russell Loubser.

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