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Don Murray & Associates

Conflict Resolution: Skills You Need to Work

"People in the front office don't treat each other very well." "The engineers don't like the manufacturing guys." "Marketing is at war with production." "Max can't talk to Phyllis."

Every day, phrases like this describe conflicts in the workplace. They are signs that a company is not as productive as it could be.

Your company doesn't have to fall into the trap. While you can't erase conflict completely, you can manage it effectively if you understand the different types of conflict, the role of stress, and learn to apply a few management skills.

Conflict: Inside Out

It's important to understand the difference between two types of conflict: intra-personal (occurs within ourselves) and interpersonal (occurs between us and other people).

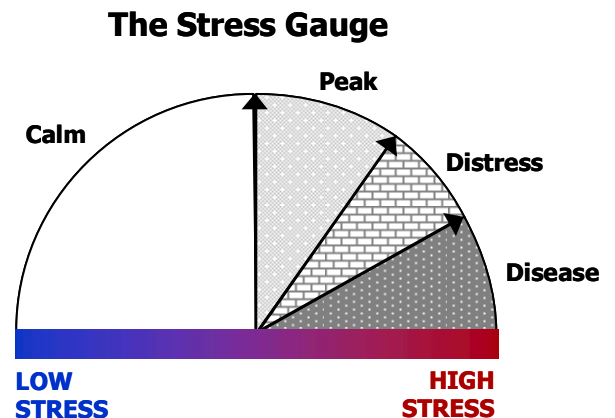
Intra-personal Conflict. Everyone has a set of "psychological tapes" – automatic responses often learned in childhood that get triggered by high stress. Let's take Max as an example. He grew up in a family where questions were asked like accusations. As an adult, when people ask "Why do you ...?" he actually hears, "You shouldn't be doing that!" When feeling accused, he blows up and overreacts.

Max is usually a dependable employee who responds appropriately to situations. But under heavy stress, his old tape from childhood can suddenly start playing—and it plays in stereo. Instead of answering a question, he'll argue back with statements like, "You have no right to question me!" or "Just who do you think you are?" As a result of interpersonal conflict, his behavior is out of proportion to the triggering event.

Interpersonal Conflict. This type of conflict can be one-way, where Carol affects Jack, or it can be reciprocal, where Carol and Jack affect each other. Interpersonal conflict is often the result of misunderstandings, unclear expectations, or mixed signals in communication. Also, it can be the result of organizational factors such as vague goals or conflicting reward systems. Knowing whether a conflict is intra- or interpersonally based is an essential first step toward resolution.

The Role of Stress

Stress is the physiological response to a triggering event or situation. It often causes an overreaction, triggering an intra-personal conflict or inflaming an interpersonal problem. To understand this better, I use the "Stress Gauge" as a guide.



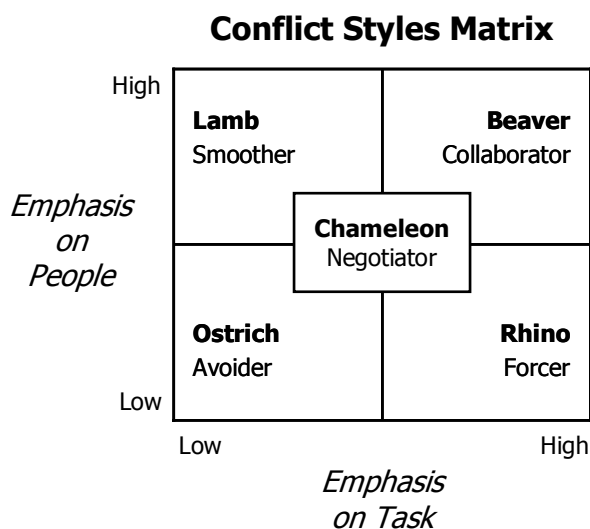
When we get up in the morning and are feeling relaxed, our stress indicators tend to point to the far left. Later, under conditions of distress we feel upset or pressured and begin to operate ineffectively with others. When we're feeling

distressed, the whole work group around us suffers. That causes more stress, and so on.

If each member of the group is aware of his or her own stress level, as well as the stress triggers of others, the entire group will be more effective. Knowledge about these triggers allows team members to avoid them.

Stress and the Team

On a team level, conflict can be resolved much more effectively when we understand how each member reacts to high-stress situations. Below is a model that can help. Placement on the model depends on how strongly each person emphasizes the people involved vs. the task at hand.



The model has five categories. If your highest emphasis when resolving conflict is on people and relationships, you're a Smoother. If you prefer to focus on tasks, you're a Forcer. If you like to emphasize both people and the task, you're a Collaborator, and so on. These personalities can be recognized in any workplace.

Knowing where someone falls on the matrix can make a difference in conflict resolution. For instance, if a woman sees herself becoming a rhino under stress, she can take steps to reduce the pressure and return to peak performance.

When she sees it in a co-worker, she knows it is probably not the time to listen, discuss, or negotiate anything. In the long run, awareness of these styles and reactions to stress creates a more effective work environment.

Resolving Interpersonal Conflict

With the understanding of styles and stress triggers of teams, there are four steps that can effectively resolve *interpersonal* conflicts.

Step 1: Originate

Each person writes down the other person's problem behavior. A facilitator then asks all parties to describe the behavior each would like the other to start practicing, keep practicing, or stop practicing. Use specific, non-judgmental terms.

Step 2: Validate

Each person reads the items he or she has listed; then the listener paraphrases the ideas back to the reader. During the process, all parties encourage feedback to make certain ideas are being clearly expressed and heard.

Step 3: Negotiate

After each sentence is correctly understood, the parties decide which response is possible for them (Yes, I'll do what you ask), not possible (No, I won't do what you ask), or an opportunity for a mutually binding contract (I'll do X if you'll do Y).

Step 4: Communicate

The parties document what has been agreed upon so members can follow up. Times are set for updating agreed-upon commitments.

After discussing the causes of conflict, the employee having a problem may be asked to write an action plan stating the problem and:

- ◆ Corrective actions needed
- ◆ Help and support needed
- ◆ How implementation will occur
- ◆ Expected results
- ◆ Time period for changes to happen

While writing this plan, the member may choose to get help from an in-company facilitator — either a team member, team leader, or a member of a specific department. The motive through all of these activities is to change the behavior and accomplish the work at hand.

Resolving Intra-personal Conflict

When a conflict is *intrapersonal*, it is most often resolved through one-on-one coaching and feedback from trusted friends or professionals. Gradually, the individual works through their “old tapes” causing the problem. Solutions are found by inviting the person to invent new, more effective responses to conflict situations.

Managing Conflict: It’s a Skill

Conflict resolution is a learned skill based on understanding the type of conflict at hand. For interpersonal conflicts, use the Conflict Styles Matrix to discover the different personality types behind the conflict. Knowing this, your group can separate conflicts from stress, then work toward resolution using the four steps of Originate, Negotiate, Validate, and Communicate. Finally, underlying problems can be addressed in ways that improve the skills of individuals as well as the group.

The result? A stronger, happier team. ■

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