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Healthy Teams Collection

Managing Interpersonal Conflict

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Managing Interpersonal Conflict

Many managers would like to believe that conflict in their team can work itself out without them having to get involved. While turning a blind eye can save time in the short-term, there's a substantial risk that the situation will only get worse. It's rare for conflict to go away on its own. And unless managed effectively, conflict can deteriorate to the point of jeopardizing a company's viability. This is because it generally leads to a decrease in employee efficiency, which can be costly.

This is particularly true in the case of interpersonal conflict. While people are focusing on interpersonal relationships, the company's objectives and profitability take a back seat. By foreseeing conflict situations and managing them before relationships break down, you can help protect the well-being of your employees and the performance of your team.

Understanding the nature of conflict

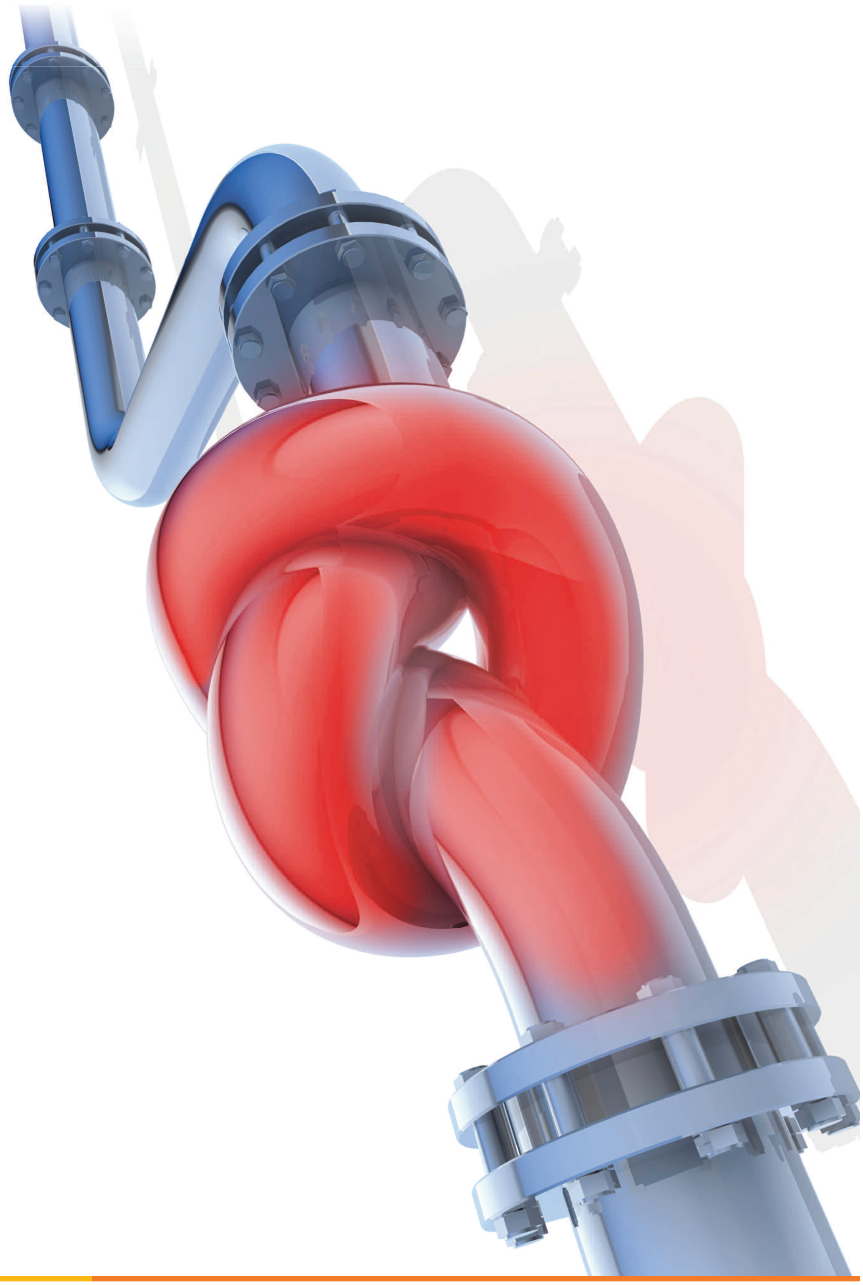
The impact of individual perceptions

Workplace conflict is a normal, natural occurrence. This is because every human being is unique and different from any other. Conflict occurs because of these differences, which distinguish individuals from one another. These differences include genetic traits, education, values and life experiences. **So conflict can be defined as an unpleasant situation arising from the differing points of view that two or more people may have about a given subject**.

While it's impossible to avoid conflict, it is possible to manage and resolve it. **We need to remember that conflict often stems from how things are perceived**. It's these perceptions, rather than facts, that make people react. Everyone has their own way of perceiving a given event, which can lead to problems ranging from a simple disagreement to all-out war.

The symptoms of conflict

There are a number of symptoms that could suggest conflict in your team. For example, if your team members all have a different perception of the work environment and each person's role; if employees who are usually motivated and optimistic are putting less effort into their work, isolating themselves and avoiding contact with other team members; if people tend to assign blame when a problem arises instead of looking for a solution; there's a good chance that there's conflict within your team.



The impact of interpersonal relationships

Most conflict that's not associated with the work environment, is interpersonal in nature. This type of conflict is difficult to manage because it's created by the fact that two people, or two groups of people see each other in a negative way, based on their perceptions, not based on what's "real". **Most of the time, this kind of conflict is the disastrous result of a simple misunderstanding that was not dealt with right away, and then got blown out of proportion**. The absence of "common ground" between the people involved, is another common reason for conflict.

To avoid this kind of conflict, you need to constantly be aware of the relationships between your employees and be attentive to their behaviour. Also, if you regularly take the time to talk to your team about problems, difficult situations and misinterpreted behaviours, you can help put things in perspective and keep the tension from mounting.

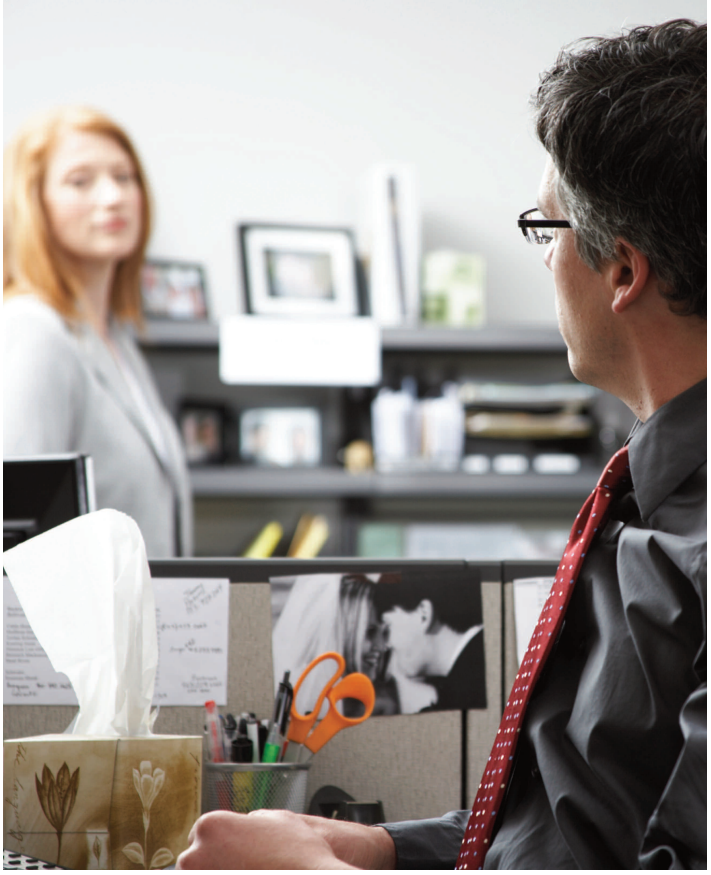
Indicators of good interpersonal relationships

- Employees generally try to improve the team's efficiency, and are willing to help their co-workers achieve objectives.
- Team members regularly discuss possible solutions for resolving day-to-day problems.
- Team members work easily together on projects, and have no difficulty taking orders.
- Employees cooperate with one another and try to find the best solution when developing strategies together.
- Team members are receptive to constructive criticism from others.
- Individuals discuss conflict situations openly and avoid preconceptions by relying on facts.
- Most team members have a good sense of humour and can laugh at day-to-day ups and downs.
- Team members recognize the importance of the work done by their co-workers.
- Team members trust and respect one another, despite their differences.

The importance of the work environment

Can conflict be prevented? Just as it's impossible to expect everyone to be the same, it's impossible to create an environment that is totally free of conflict. While conflict is inevitable, we can guard against its harmful effects. **The importance you place on the day-to-day work environment, is one way to do this**. It's much easier to resolve a conflict when there is a positive work environment where communication is encouraged. This minimizes misunderstandings and the potential for misinterpretations, and encourages cooperation. Ongoing communication, whether formal or informal, promotes team spirit, limits prejudices and minimizes emotional reactions.

Don't let preconceptions bias your judgment



Assessing the causes and possible approaches

Gathering the facts

Before you can manage conflict, you first need to establish the root of the problem. The first step is to hear each person's side of the story. Your goal is to determine the source of the conflict by relying solely on the facts without being swayed by the perceptions of the people involved.

While being open to what each party has to say, you need to focus on the circumstances that led to the conflict rather than the emotions of the individuals concerned. **By gathering the facts, your goal is to find ways of resolving the conflict, not to prove that one of the parties is right**. This will then help you prepare a strategy that separates the rational component from the emotional one.

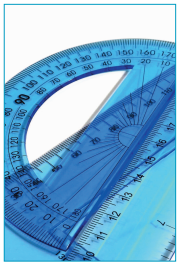
Your analysis of the situation will also help you choose the most appropriate way to manage the conflict: avoidance, peace-keeping, force, compromise or cooperation. Each of these approaches has its merits, and should be chosen based on the situation and the circumstances involved (see sidebar on next page). Your preliminary analysis of the reasons behind the conflict will help you choose the best approach.

To resolve a conflict, you need to have all the facts

Organizational diagnosis

In addition to assessing what's causing the conflict on an interpersonal level, you also need to look at the organizational factors that may be having an impact, and that could even be the underlying cause. Read each statement below and determine whether or not it accurately describes your work environment. For each "no" answer, determine what could be done to improve the situation.

	Yes	No		Yes	No
The objectives and strategies are well defined and have been clearly explained to the team members.	☐	☐	Team members are given feedback to recognize their contribution to the results.	☐	☐
The policies, procedures and processes are consistent with the strategies and objectives.	☐	☐	Information circulates freely and unfounded rumours are quickly defused.	☐	☐
The degree of responsibility, authority and autonomy are clearly established.	☐	☐	The existence of different opinions, views and philosophies is encouraged.	☐	☐
The resources needed to do the job (materials, equipment, training, etc.) are made available to the team members.	☐	☐	Constructive criticism of strategies, policies and procedures is taken into account.	☐	☐
Individual performance objectives are clearly defined and communicated.	☐	☐	When conflict is impeding the team's effectiveness, a meeting is quickly organized to help the individuals resolve their differences.	☐	☐



Conflict resolution approaches

There are several possible ways of resolving conflict. Depending on the situation and the circumstances involved, one of these approaches may seem more appropriate than another. In the workplace, the "cooperation" approach is recommended whenever possible, since it focuses primarily on the results to be achieved rather than on the people involved. The other approaches can still be useful however, when the cooperation approach is not applicable.

Avoidance or side-stepping

This is a lose-lose approach. It's the art of acting as though the conflict doesn't exist, and hoping it will go away on its own. Managers who choose this strategy don't want to get involved. This strategy can be used to buy time, but it's not a long-term solution.

Compromise or negotiation

This is a semi-win-semi-win approach. It's a strategy that gives everyone the opportunity to express their opinion, with the goal of finding a solution that's agreeable to all parties. With this strategy, finding a solution that everyone is comfortable with is more important than finding the best solution. It rarely produces the most effective solution since compromise, by definition, involves each party giving up something.

Peace-keeping or self-sacrifice

This is a lose-win approach. It's a strategy generally used by people who place much more importance on people than on the task at hand or the results to be achieved, and who want to keep everyone happy. They see conflict as destructive, and are prepared to do whatever it takes to keep the peace. This strategy is designed to pacify the people involved, but has little or no impact on the factors at the root of the problem.

Cooperation or working together

This is a win-win approach. It's a strategy that places as much importance on the objectives as the people involved in the conflict. Its main characteristic is the use of a problem-solving approach. However, in order to be effective, this strategy takes time, energy and good faith, as well as a desire for resolution on the part of everyone involved.

Force or position of authority

This is a win-lose approach. It's a strategy used by those who place greater importance on goals than on anything else, and who are prepared to go to any length to achieve these goals. It's also used by people who rely on their status or authority to settle the disagreement unilaterally. In these cases, the real cause of the conflict usually remains unresolved, and the benefits of the imposed solution are only temporary or superficial.

Developing an action plan

The three keys to success

Good conflict management requires you **to be impartial, look for solutions and rely on the facts**. Supporting one party over another will not resolve the situation. On the contrary, it may make matters worse. Your goal is not to decide who's right, but to understand what's dividing the parties involved. By keeping in mind that work objectives take priority over personal interests, you can easily avoid the pitfalls of taking sides.

In order to be effective, the conflict resolution process needs to focus on finding a real solution, not just making the problem go away. The chances of success are also directly proportional to the importance you place on the situation and the follow-up you perform. **Lastly, it's essential to stick to the facts and avoid emotional outbursts**. By using the facts, and nothing but the facts, you'll remain objective and focused on resolving the conflict.

Meeting plan

The nature of the conflict is:

_____

_____

_____

So far, the conflict has developed as follows (describe only the facts):

_____

_____

_____

_____

The observed behaviours are:

_____

_____

_____

_____

The consequences of these behaviours on the work are:

_____

_____

_____

Intervention strategy

In conflict situations, **your intervention should be limited to the behaviours that are influencing your team members' performance and the results they're supposed to achieve**. If you try to change people, their personality or their perceptions, you'll find yourself in an endless pursuit that will not produce the desired results.

During the meeting, you should expect that people won't be very rational, and will focus instead on their impressions, feelings and perceptions. Letting people verbalize their feelings without it escalating into an argument will help them gain perspective. Be patient and remain calm. In addition, use a meeting plan like the one on the left. The parties need to feel your desire to resolve the situation objectively, and to involve them in the process.

Always keep in mind that the goal of your intervention is not for the employees to become best friends, but to enable them to work together without their personal disputes having a negative impact on their performance.

Stay calm and keep your emotions in check

Resolving the conflict

There are several methods for resolving interpersonal conflict, most of which include the following five steps.

1 - Agree on the approach

Set the tone by establishing the purpose of the meeting, the ground rules and the approach. All parties need to demonstrate a sincere desire to resolve the situation, not to be "the winner". Make sure the people involved are respectful of one another.

2 - Summarize the situation

Once the approach has been established, each side needs to understand the perceptions of the other. To de-escalate the situation, use the facts you've gathered and summarize everyone's perceptions. Keep going back to the facts and the objective information you've gathered.

3 - List the feasible solutions

Explain to each party that you don't want to impose a solution, and that it's a choice that will be made together. Help them be constructive. Take stock of possible solutions together, and identify the ones that seem feasible.

4 - Draw up an action plan

Choose one of the proposed solutions and draw up an action plan in which you express your expectations and the desired results. Determine each person's responsibilities for achieving these results (who, what, when and how).

5 - Hold a follow-up meeting

Plan a follow-up meeting in the short-term and specify what will be assessed. During the meeting, thank the parties for their cooperation if the conflict has been resolved. If the action plan hasn't been followed, go over the disciplinary measures that will be taken if the situation doesn't change.

Conflict has been at the root of many great inventions. Differing opinions can deteriorate into conflict as easily as they can evolve in unexpected directions. Many people have founded prosperous companies because they didn't agree with their colleagues about their ideas or methods.

Other people have persisted in developing a concept that others didn't like, but which turned out to have unprecedented commercial success. In short, you don't need to eliminate differences of opinion within a team. On the contrary, by using a constructive approach, you can make the most of different opinions to contribute to the growth and success of the organization.

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