Keeping the peace (and productivity): diffusing team conflict

Handling team conflict is among the most critical actions you can take on as a manger or supervisor. Many team leaders, however, don't want to get involved when tensions start to run high. Some worry about "stirring up trouble" or worsening the situation. They may feel uncomfortable or hesitant to address potentially emotionally charged disputes. Others simply don't realize a conflict exists, or don't recognize the full extent of its impact on team dynamics.

However, the consequences of not dealing with conflict, particularly in its early stages, can be harmful to the team and organization. Unresolved conflict can:

- Increase employee anxiety
- Decrease employee job satisfaction
- Cause anger and frustration
- Lower team morale
- Damage relationships
- Encourage unhealthy competition and pit workers against one another
- Waste time and resources
- Lower productivity
- Increase staff turnover
- Lead to sabotage and, in extreme cases, workplace violence

Clashes amongst colleagues can obviously disrupt, or even prevent, a team from reaching its goals. But when managed effectively, conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it may even be beneficial to the team and your organization. By managing conflict early and effectively you'll:

- Strengthen relationships and foster teamwork
- Encourage open communication and co-operation among team members
- Create a calmer and more positive work environment
- Provide opportunities to air issues from all sides and potentially develop more integrative solutions
- Increase productivity
- Make better use of time and resources
- Lower staff turnover

But before you can effectively managing conflict, you need to recognize the areas of disagreement, or

"pain points" that exist within your team. Common brands of workplace conflict include:

Interdependence conflicts: Most employees depend on inputs, resources or support from other team members to perform their duties. If an employee perceives others are not fulfilling their side of the interdependent relationship, conflict may result.

Work-style conflicts: Employees may have different approaches to their work tasks and how they complete them. One worker, for example, may like to complete assignments as quickly as possible, while another may prefer to take more time on details. Disagreements often arise when employees with different styles work closely together or rely on one another.

Personality and interpersonal conflicts: The typical workplace brings together diverse employees of different ages, gender, cultural backgrounds, personality types and life experiences. Any of these differences has the potential to become a point of conflict.

Role definition conflicts: When team roles are not clearly defined, conflict over who is responsible for a given task or objective can creep in. A person may believe another employee or department is 'over-stepping' his or her bounds by becoming involved in a particular role.

Organizational and change-based conflicts: Change is inevitable in almost any organization. But when employees disagree with new policies, procedures or other adjustments to the status quo, it can cause arguments to erupt.

The root cause of a conflict may be very different from the way it presents. An argument over a new schedule, for example, may actually be caused by a generation gap (or interpersonal conflict) between the employees involved, so changing the schedule will do little to resolve the wider issue. As a people leader, carefully assess all conflict situations to make sure you identify the actual source of the disagreement.

While early stage conflicts may be more hidden, there are several things you can do to spot emerging issues and address them before they get out of hand.

Watch for signs of employee conflict including:

- Colleagues not speaking or ignoring one another
- Employees who often contradict or bad-mouth each other
- Team members undermining each other or refusing to work together
- Individuals or groups being left out of activities or decisions affecting the entire team.

Watch for symptoms of employee conflict: Decreased productivity, absenteeism and negative attitudes are all red flags that can indicate conflict is dragging your team down.

Get to know your team: Taking the time to really know the 'pulse' of your team's members will help to keep you in the loop and spot changes in their demeanour and actions (which could suggest conflict) before quarrels blow up into full-out warfare.

Just ask: Sometimes the easiest and most effective way to spot flashpoints on your team is to simply ask. Anonymous surveys are a great, non-threatening way for team members to bring potential areas of conflict to your attention.

Conflict is inevitable in even the most effective and well-managed teams. What matters though, is *how* that conflict is handled. Through quickly identifying points of disagreement and working to correct them, you can successfully steer clear of or eliminate long-term damage to the team's dynamic and build a stronger, more cohesive group.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact LifeWorks to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.