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(2014) 186 Employment Today 30

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Conflict in the workplace is not uncommon, but it's important to identify the source of conflict before making any interventions, says Cher Williscroft. Here she gives some practical advice on dealing with interpersonal work conflict. [(2014) 186 Employment Today 30, 31]

Misunderstandings, miscommunication, relationship breakdowns, stand-offs, avoidance, toxic cliques, poor team work and bullying—these are common results of unresolved workplace conflicts, and the consequent loss of productivity and on team morale and turnover are well researched.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

When dealing with conflict in the workplace (see diagram), it is important that the leader identifies the source of the conflict before making any interventions. One type of conflict that causes more serious issues is intra-psychic conflict which occurs within a person internally, interfering with a person's ability to perform or relate to team-mates. A more obvious type of conflict is that which occurs between two team members, namely interpersonal conflict. Poor communication, lack of cooperation, disrespect, and bullying are often the results of interpersonal conflict.

When a group of team members is experiencing conflict with several other team members, and subgroups form for and against each other, leaders are facing intra-team conflict. Lastly, a lack of cooperation and breakdown in communication between two teams within the same organisation is likely to be caused by inter-team conflict.

This article focuses on interpersonal conflict (between two people) caused by complex issues such as old wounds or different styles, belief, values, habits and conditioned patterned responses. I will give some practical leadership tips on how to approach two staff members whose relationship has broken down, along with guidance as to when to call in the experts.

A TYPICAL CASE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Larry is a manager with a team of 12 reporting to him, including George and Sarah. George and Sarah don't see eye to eye and are often sniping, and bad-mouthing each other. Larry, the leader, hears George say: "Sarah is lazy and not a team player, she cherry-picks the good jobs and leaves the rest to us to clean up", while Sarah complains "George is such a control freak, and a busybody who should concentrate on his own work, and stop worrying about mine."

The rest of the team notice the relationship breakdown, the negative body language at team meetings, and the back-stabbing. They are annoyed about the impact on them caused by the lack of cooperation between George and Sarah. George has complained several times to Larry, as have others in the team. Larry has noticed team members are beginning to identify with either George or Sarah and he sees cliques forming causing even further division.

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Leaders are often called into the fray because goodwill and trust has broken down to such an extent that two workers won't talk to each other face to face, or staff don't trust themselves or each other enough to talk it through. They fear an escalation, repercussions, and further breakdown in their relationships. **[(2014) 186 Employment Today 30, 32]**

For the sake of team harmony, Larry decides to nip things in the bud before it becomes a deeply entrenched team issue. He is aware others may leave his team and he knows he has a duty of care to the whole team to resolve this.

ONE CAUSE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT IS A VALUES CLASH

A values clash occurs when two people have different ideas about how things should work or colleagues should conduct themselves. All our behaviours and reactions (and consequently our feelings) stem from our deeply held ideas or beliefs about how people "should" behave or how things "should be done".

Based on our values, we all hold deep convictions (some of which are unspoken) about what is the "right" way to behave. Consequently, we judge others, make assumptions, and have expectations of what others "should" do. In this case study, George thinks Sarah is lazy (his judgement), she doesn't want to help others (his assumption) and she should do her whole job rather than prioritising the enjoyable bits (his expectations).

THE LEADER SEPARATES PERFORMANCE ISSUES FROM INTERPERSONAL ISSUES

First Larry must clearly identify which issues are in fact performance issues and are his responsibility to address, and which issues are interpersonal and therefore the subject of a conflict resolution process. He talks to Sarah about how she prioritises her workload and reaches a clear agreement that she will stick to her priorities. Larry is clear that it is not George's role to manage Sarah's lack of time management.

Next, he then talks to George about his inappropriate outbursts about Sarah, making his expectations of workplace behaviour very clear to George. Both parties are clear about the consequence of further examples of poor performance.

As a mediator, I find that many interpersonal conflicts are caused by a leadership vacuum, a failure on the leader's part to address poor performance. Once the leader takes steps to proactively address poor performance, the problem often goes away.

THE LEADER INSISTS ON A DESCRIPTION OF ACTUAL BEHAVIOUR

Larry sets up two separate meetings with George and Sarah to investigate the situation. He insists on confidentiality at this early stage so that the conflict doesn't cause further unnecessary distraction for other workers.

Interpersonal conflict that is not contained can quickly turn toxic, leading to a break-down in team cohesion. Larry asks each party to describe actual behaviour they have observed rather than expressing their judgement, assumptions, and expectations. For instance, when George says: "Sarah is lazy and disrespectful, she only does what she likes and cherry-picks the easy work. She should pull her weight", Larry replies: "Please give me an example of something that has actually happened that makes you form this view of Sarah."

Larry finds out the history, the issues and gets a perspective from differing points of view, building up a picture of what has occurred over time.

THE LEADER EXPLORES THE VALUES CLASH BETWEEN PARTIES

In the initial interview, Larry plans to find out what values George and Sarah hold strongly, and identify the values clash that is fuelling this conflict. He asks George: "What is important to you in this situation?" Next he asks George to finish the following sentence from his own point of view: "The world works best when ..." or "things work best when ...". He asks: "If Sarah was to do things according to how you see the world, what would she be doing differently?"

The answer to these and other focused questions will start to reveal George's values. George says the world works best when everyone works as a team and pulls their weight and Sarah should do her own work rather than leave her mess up to him to fix.

When Larry talks to Sarah she says things work best when people work to their talents and strengths and team members should focus on what they are good at.

Larry then encourages Sarah and George to take steps to improve the working relationships immediately, making it clear that a continued stand-off, or failure to cooperate with each other is unacceptable behaviour. By the end of this initial interview, Larry pinpoints that there is a values clash between these two colleagues about how work should be approached, prioritised, and how they communicate over work that is not completed.

THE LEADER DECIDES IF THE RELATIONSHIP CAN BE REBUILT

To decide if the relationship can be improved through a facilitated meeting, Larry must make an assessment of the parties' goodwill, trust, and skill level. He considers: is there enough good will? Can trust be rebuilt? What ability do George and Sarah have to conduct themselves professionally in a facilitated meeting? Will they repeat old reactive and harmful behaviour?

Larry decides to facilitate a meeting to build greater understanding and restore the trust that has been lost. He lets both parties know the purpose of the meeting and gets their buy-in to participating professionally for their own success and for the sake of the whole team. [(2014) 186 Employment Today 30, 33]

THE LEADER FOLLOWS A CLEAR METHODOLOGY

An experienced mediator is always well-prepared, they have a plan, and they have a clear methodology that they use. They often act as coach and mentor so that parties communicate their perspectives appropriately, listen carefully, and don't repeat old behaviour that is destructive to the relationship.

Larry begins by repeating the need for confidentiality and asks each party to tell a story of what is happening. If he hears judgemental or accusatory language, he intervenes. He encourages questions from the parties, and gets each party to acknowledge their contribution to the breakdown knowing a "contribution" conversation will reduce the tendency to blame.

Each party lets the other know the impact on them and Larry brings the impact on the wider team to their awareness. He promotes a discussion about the values clash he has observed and works with the parties to build a bridge of greater understanding and acceptance. Finally he focuses on the future asking two questions: "What is in your control to resolve this situation or make sure it is not repeated? What do you think is in the other person control to change things?"

Larry states his expectations, and gets an agreement on what each person will do from now on. He may email these to the parties afterwards, setting up a time for a review.

Larry is pleased with his efforts. George and Sarah have discussed their differences, they have understood each other and accepted each other, made future agreements and are aware of the consequences of any further breakdown.

WHEN IS CONFLICT RESOLVED?

Conflict can be said to be resolved when all parties are fully satisfied with the outcome. To resolve interpersonal conflict, the opinions, values and beliefs of both people are recognised and valued. Secondly the relationship between the two is maintained and remains open to continued development. This means there is no residual frustration or at least not enough to precipitate future episodes.

However, we know that humans don't respond rationally, and they are easily triggered into old habitual behaviours, so when is it wiser to call in the experts?

WHEN DO YOU CALL IN AN EXPERT?

Before a leader attempts to resolve the conflict, I suggest they ask themselves the following questions: Can I remain neutral, am I viewed as impartial, have I contributed to the relationship breakdown myself, do I have preconceived ideas of who is right and wrong, will I get frustrated or lose my grip, do I have a closer relationship with one party than the other, or do I anticipate I may end up out of my depth?

An experienced mediator or facilitator will make an assessment and give the leader recommendations as to whether mediation is the best solution, and if not they may recommend further training and coaching for the parties or the leader.

They have the skills to coach parties to conduct themselves appropriately and respectfully. They will know how to deal with all sorts of different personalities and any likely poor behaviour. They have a clear methodology and perhaps, most importantly, they know when mediation is not the answer.

TYPES OF CONFLICT IN A TEAM SETTING

<p>Internal conflict: An individual team member is experiencing an inner personal conflict that may or may not be in response to the team. Nonetheless, the conflict is interfering with the person's ability to perform.</p>	
<p>Inter-personal conflict: A team member is experiencing conflict with one or more other team members. This may be one way or mutual.</p> <p>Performance issues: A leader is required to address under par performance or attitude.</p>	
<p>Intra-team conflicts: Several team members are experiencing conflict with several other team members.</p>	
<p>Inter-team conflicts: The team as a whole is experiencing conflict with another team.</p>	

Source: Diana Jones, Organisation Development Company.