WORKPLACE CONFLICT

➤ **RICHARD KAY**

UNDERSTANDING IS THE KEY TO MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE.

Conflict is defined as "a struggle or fight, disagreement, to be incompatible" and is most often caused by people failing to get what they want. It is human nature. Conflict can occur on many levels and you can guarantee that it is present in your workplace. However, assessing the damage conflict causes to an organisation can be very difficult to determine.

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

Conflict is *unhealthy* when it is avoided or approached on a win/lose basis. Animosities will develop, communication will break down, trust and mutual support will deteriorate and hostilities will result. Conflict is *healthy* when it causes parties to explore new ideas, test their position and beliefs and stretch their imagination. When conflict is dealt with constructively, people can be stimulated to greater creativity, leading to a wider variety of alternatives and better results. Understanding conflict and resolving it in a positive manner creates effective communication and successful teamwork.

Common signs include:
➤ what is said, how it is said and what is not said
➤ what is heard and what is not heard
➤ what is felt, by either party involved
➤ open hostility
➤ lack of cooperation, support, and harmony with team objective
➤ poor morale and performance
➤ absenteeism or high staff turnover.

DISTORTED PERCEPTIONS

The elements of conflict are much the same in any situation, whether involving individuals, groups or organisations. Humans in conflict have a curious tendency to form diabolical images of each other. These distorted images

> **UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT AND RESOLVING IT IN A POSITIVE MANNER CREATES EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND SUCCESSFUL TEAMWORK.**

are so similar that they are called *mirror-image perceptions*: as we see them – as untrustworthy and evil intentioned – so they see us. This self-serving bias leads us to accept credit for our good deeds and to shuck blame for, or to self-justify, our bad deeds.

Although both parties may admit to contributing to the conflict, the fundamental attribution error leads us to see each other's actions as arising from an aggressive disposition, whereas our own actions are seen as a necessary response to a threatening situation. This can be further exacerbated when people pit their individual interests against the overall wellbeing of the group or organisation. Information about one another's actions is then filtered, interpreted and remembered in accordance with preconceived stereotypes. Group interaction between like-minded people may polarise these tendencies, leading to a group-think tendency to see one's own group as moral and one's opposition as less than fully human, with motives and behaviours that fully justify whatever one does to retaliate.

The end result of such perceptions is a vicious cycle of hostility. People tend to treat more warmly someone they believe likes them and are treated more warmly by them in return. Liking begets liking. Similarly, hostility begets hostility. If Peter believes Sue is annoyed at him, he may snub her, causing her to act in ways that justify his perception. As it is with individuals, so it is with groups and organisations. Perceptions tend to be self-confirming by triggering the other party to react in ways that seem to justify the perceptions.

MANAGING CONFLICT

Although conflicts are easily ignited and sustained by social traps and misconceptions, it is possible for acts of retaliation to be replaced by peaceful gestures. Such transformations are most likely in situations characterised by cooperation, communication and conciliation.

1. Cooperation. Does it help to put two conflicting parties into close contact so they might get to know and like each other? It depends. When contact is non-competitive and between parties of equal status, it may indeed help. Initially prejudiced co-workers can learn to accept one another, if given super-ordinate goals – that is, shared goals that override the differences and require them to cooperate. Thus, what reduces conflict

is not contact itself, but cooperative contact, which encourages more positive attitudes.

2. Communication. Often in conflict people are distrustful and pursue their individual interests as a defence against exploitation. When allowed to communicate – to discuss the dilemma they shared and to negotiate a commitment to cooperate – cooperation usually arose. When conflicts are intense, a third-party mediator may facilitate communication. Mediators help each party to voice its viewpoint and, in the process, understand the other's. Such understanding is most needed, yet least likely, in times of crisis. When conflicts grow intense our images of one another become more distorted and oversimplified, communication becomes more difficult, and judgements become more premature and rigid.

3. Conciliation. When tension and suspicion run high, cooperation and communication become impossible. Each party is likely to threaten, coerce, or retaliate – the very actions that will worsen the conflict. At the same time, both parties recognise that appeasement through unconditional cooperation is naïve and likely to invite exploitation.

Under such conditions, an alternative to war or surrender is a strategy called *Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension-reduction* (GRIT). In application, one side announces its recognition of mutual interests and its intent to reduce tensions. It then initiates one or more small, conciliatory acts. Without weakening one's retaliatory capability, this modest beginning opens the door for reciprocation by the other party. Should they respond with hostility, this would be reciprocated in kind. But so would any conciliatory response. GRIT is a most effective strategy for increasing trust and cooperation. Even in times of intense personal conflict, when communication is nonexistent, a conciliatory gesture – a smile, a touch, a word of apology – may be all that is needed to allow for both parties to begin de-escalation, where communication and mutual understanding can begin.
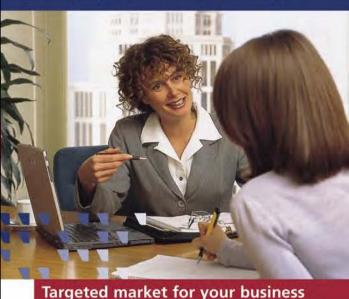
SIX POSITIVE STEPS

The following six factors are offered as a guide to managing conflict in the workplace.
1. Focus on the objective of a mutually agreeable solution.
2. Remain neutral and personalise communication.
3. Ask questions to open up communication, gather information and clarify opinions.
4. Demonstrate active listening, which involves co-operation, not competition.
5. Avoid arguing and show empathy for the other's position.
6. Offer options, not ultimatums. **NA**

Richard Kay is the principal of Dynamic Training, a registered training organisation that provides human resource solutions across several industry sectors and facilitates a variety of programs ranging from nationally accredited courses, government funded traineeships and customised programs tailored to suit specific organisational requirements. For more information, call (03) 9432 3466 or visit <www.dynamictraining.com.au>.