

Defusing Conflict

Conflict is a natural occurrence and an inevitable by-product of human interaction. It can have positive outcomes, triggering change and growth, or it can be a destructive force, causing hurt feelings, intimidation and breakdowns in solidarity. Recognizing conflicts as they arise and finding workable solutions to contentious issues can bolster positive relations in the workplace.

Causes and Consequences

Different people respond to conflict in different ways. Some prefer to avoid it entirely; some will give in to the other side to keep the peace; some will compromise; some will force others into adopting their own point of view; and some will work with the other party to achieve a workable solution. There is no optimal means of resolving conflict, as every situation is unique.

Flexibility, however, can play a vital role in turning a conflict into something positive. In mediating a dispute, it is best for stewards to assess the situation as carefully and objectively as possible. These are some of the factors to consider:

- ▶ *Who is involved* - Look at the people engaged in conflict, their values and expectations, and what resources they have. These would include information, group support, self-esteem, and the parties' typical approaches to conflict.
- ▶ *Their prior relationship to one another* - Determine what has gone on between the parties in the past and how each might feel about the other.
- ▶ *The issue at hand* - Pinpoint how the parties might see the issue and what effect "winning" or "losing" the battle might have on them.
- ▶ *How others react* - Determine whether others might have a stake in the dispute and if they have opinions on the matter.
- ▶ *Methods of communication* - Note how the parties communicate with each other and if either side has been aggressive or threatening.

Dealing with Conflict

Conflict often stems from poor communication, and the parties should try to be as frank as possible about the source of their anger. It is helpful for a steward mediating a conflict to determine the goals of each of the parties, as this can provide a platform for the problem's ultimate resolution. If the conflict is intense and disruptive, crisis intervention may be necessary.

A conflict may be addressed on the basis of content - i.e., the issue at hand - or process - i.e., the larger context of the dispute. Try to remain as impartial as possible, and listen carefully to the parties to clarify and summarize their arguments. Having a clear understanding of the issues involved in a dispute can pave the way for its resolution. Avoid letting

emotions dominate the scenario, and strive to stay away from generalizations.

Steps for Problem-Solving

A problem-solving approach to conflict resolution involves both parties in an effort to reach a mutually agreeable solution. Problem-solving is most likely to succeed if the following elements are in place:

- ▶ *Recognition of the problem* - Both parties should recognize that they have a problem.
- ▶ *Balance in resources* - The resources of each side - e.g., approval of co-workers, personal security, influence, intellect and information - should be relative balanced.
- ▶ *Good faith* - the parties need to be committed to ironing out their differences.
- ▶ *Availability of time* - Finding a mutually agreeable solution to a problem is less likely if there are pressing time constraints.
- ▶ *Open communication* - A steward can set an example to others by not taking sides in the disagreement and by establishing an open and accepting atmosphere in the workplace. People should be able to express their points of view freely without being criticized or threatened.

Following is a four-step approach to successful problem-solving:

1. *Establish common ground* - Many conflicts arise from miscommunication. Point out similarities in the goals of the two sides, or previous instances in which the parties have worked cooperatively. People tend to relate better to people who have similar beliefs, values, desires, or interests.
2. *Analyze the problem* - Get the parties to articulate the problem as specifically as possible before looking at possible solutions. Devise a common list of problems and goals and frame every issue in terms of the entire group.
3. *Generate possible solutions* - Generate as many ideas as possible for resolving the conflict by tapping into the creativity of everyone involved.
4. *Evaluate solutions* - Achieving consensus, where a possible solution is agreed to by all concerned, is the best means of resolving a conflict. Possible solutions should be evaluated in terms of quality and acceptability. People should not be asked to justify their choices; and anger should be addressed as it occurs.

(*A Manual for Group Facilitators*, New Society Publishers, 4527 Springfield Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143)