

Reducing Conflict 69 Repeated Conflict

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Conflict in an organization can take many forms. It can be a one-off type, or it can be repeated conflict. Also, repeated conflict can be between two or more specific individuals or between groups.

All of these types of situations are challenging, but conflict between groups is the most difficult to solve. This article describes the most helpful tools I have found to deal with these categories of conflict.

Repeated conflict between individuals

In this case, the conflict is limited to a problem between two people. It may be caused by a misunderstanding, or it could be a power struggle. More than one bout of conflict between individuals calls for some form of coaching. A third party can act as a mediator to help resolve specific issues. Look for and resolve the underlying cause.

Often some form of individual training is helpful to prevent future flare-ups. If the root cause is jealousy, you need to establish what has to change to prevent future conflict. Get the individuals together and brainstorm what needs to change. Stress the benefits of a more cordial relationship.

Repeated conflict between groups

If the conflict is between groups or cliques of people, the issue is more serious. There are several people involved in each of the warring groups, so the collateral damage is bigger. You may find that the leaders of both groups are encouraging conflict with inflammatory language.

For sure, a lack of trust will exist between the groups. Often, they have forgotten that they are subgroups that are really on the same team. One helpful approach is to remind the groups that they share a common goal at a higher level. They are really on the same team with different roles. Stress that expending energy fighting with a different subgroup compromises the performance of the whole.

Teambuilding is often the answer

Getting groups that fight all the time to play nicely and appreciate each other is a challenge. One technique that worked for me in a couple situations was to swap some members of the groups that are fighting. When it becomes difficult to tell which group is which, the walls of suspicion come down. You need to approach this technique

delicately, because a heavy hand will often lead to a revolt. Try a philosophy of cross-training to increase bench strength in the larger unit.

I recall two groups of engineers in my area were having all kinds of problems working together. They were operating as fiefdoms that were encouraged by their respective leaders. When I convinced a couple of people to swap roles, the problems subsided quickly. It was a difficult sell at first. I reminded the individuals that a variety of experiences would make them more attractive candidates for future promotions.

You can do some form of classical team building if the groups are willing to participate. There are numerous techniques and many consultants that specialize in experiential team building. Some examples of activities include maze games, scavenger hunts, solving word problems, trust falls, and hundreds of other exercises. These activities force people to interact together and then debrief what they learned.

You are working on building higher trust within the combined group. Talk to people in the different groups to understand the specific nature of their problems. Often times this detective work provides information to an elegant solution.

Do not do this work with a focus on the individual cliques. That approach will likely exacerbate the problem by making the cliques stronger. Work with the combined groups.

There may be a situation where one person causes havoc in both teams. Consider a different role for this individual. Many times changing a single individual can resolve years of acrimony.

Make sure to work on the underlying cause

It is tempting when dealing with conflict to go in and find out the current problem. Then you work to eliminate the problem and think everything will be fine. If you haven't resolved the underlying cause of the conflict, it will inevitably come back in a different issue. Always seek to improve the level of mutual trust. That is the most direct route to resolving repeated conflict.

Conclusion

Solving repeated conflict can be a challenge. If you go at it with resolve and get some help when needed, you can make substantial progress. Don't forget to praise activities that show progress in working together. Positive reinforcement will amplify the constructive relationships.

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