

Effective, appropriate conflict management systems

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No conflict lasts forever. Eventually, conflict participants use at least one conflict management tool to settle into a resolution pattern that is unique to them.

Conflict competent patterns are those that use conflict management tools leading to mutually satisfactory outcomes. Employees' reactions to conflict competent patterns usually include long tenure, higher productivity, better decision-making, and good morale.

On the other hand, conflict incompetent tools might be whining until someone gives in, or screaming someone into sullen silence. Those conflicts will temporarily go underground, to resurface at the next opportunity. Employees' reactions to conflict incompetent patterns may include sabotaging or quitting their jobs, or going on stress leave.

Since conflicts can attend every relationship, an employer can reap payoffs in productivity, stress reduction, and worker retention by offering appropriate and effective avenues for dealing with conflicts as they arise. Satisfactory workplaces offer appropriate and effective conflict management systems. The essence of 'effective' is how well it gets legitimate needs met. 'Appropriate' means having a repertoire of situationally suitable strategies for meeting those needs. If whining proves ineffective and inappropriate, an appropriate strategy includes the capacity to try different approaches. An effective strategy discerns which appropriate approach would fit the situation.

There are two obvious measurements of conflict competence in workplaces:

- 1) the quantity of unproductive and unresolved conflict (negative conflict);
- 2) the quality of ambient and intentional conflict resolution strategies and mechanisms (positive conflict).

The two conflict indicators are inversely connected; employers can decrease the quantity of distracting and destructive (negative) conflicts by increasing the systems and structures supporting effective and appropriate (positive) conflict. Each employment environment has its own unique culture and norms that the conflict management design should fit. Some of the simple rules for establishing conflict management systems apply across those cultures and norms.

1. Simple rules for conflict management systems

Accessible

A conflict management system should be welcoming, understandable, and free of barriers to finding it. No one should feel fear of consequences, whether direct or indirect, for using it. As part of employee orientation, offer training in how to access and optimize the

conflict management system's benefits. Ensure managers perceive conflict management system as supporting their role, not as a critique of their ability to manage people.

Confidential

Confidentiality helps the parties talk about what is going on under the surface of their disagreement. The real conflict may be unrelated to the presenting problem. Confidential agreements can be easier to implement, can reduce the risk of infringing privacy, and reassure the parties that there are no sanctions for using the conflict management system.

Affordable

There are innumerable tangible costs to negative conflict. Some researchers estimate that workplace conflict add five per cent to the price of every good and service that is consumed. The cost of having a system for dealing with conflict can also be calculated. The business case for a conflict management system is in the data about the costs of each.

Fair

What is fair is both objective and subjective. If the conflict management system feels impartial, which is not the same as neutral, it will have a better chance of being perceived as fair. When people believe that they have been dealt with fairly, they can be satisfied even if they do not get everything they want.

Flexible

Conflict can be creative, so its management and resolution should be too. While a standard of conduct can be firm, how it is achieved can be adaptable. Design the system to encourage the parties to resolve their issues at the lowest level of engagement. Make expectations explicit, from the lowest (informal) to highest (formal) level.

Systemic

Have as many entry points into conflict management as possible, from the lowest to highest level of process. There is a range of processes for individuals, small or large groups, including: ombuds, arbitration, mediation, med/arb, arb/med, guided dialogue, conflict coaching, and facilitation. Each of these processes has an array of models. Let the users make choices about how they will access the system.

Transparent

Enshrine the conflict management system in company policy. The policy sends a message of support and intention just by being there. People in conflict seek information, so have a simple, step-by-step written description of the policy that gives the available options for dealing with the conflict. People will pay attention to it when they need it, so post the policy where they congregate.

Evaluate

People can identify their problems, and know what they need. Try a pilot project in one area, and fine-tune the system based on feedback and structured evaluation. Enlarge the conflict management system as it evolves.

Simple

A conflict management system can be overburdened with rules acting as barriers that keep people out. Simple rules can create complex behaviour that emerges naturally. Just as conflicts are an emergent property of any relationship, so will resolutions become an emergent property of a well-designed conflict management system.

Conclusion

Being effective and appropriate in conflict management strategies, can positively affect the amount of workplace conflict, which affects employee satisfaction with their work. Conflict management can have a ripple effect as the change amplifies throughout the organization. Some conflict management is proactive; an employer doesn't have to wait for a dispute to become hostile. If the whole problem cannot be fixed, it is still possible to de-escalate the presenting issues to allow work to continue productively.

2. Organizational considerations in developing a conflict management system

Conflict is a sign that people care enough to put their energy into an issue. Dissent is a normal feature of thinking about working relationships, and alternative points of view can prevent mistakes. A conflict management system should not be used to suppress dissent or conflict. Suppressing alternative views can keep a conflict simmering until it erupts in other ways, such as stress, disruption, and 'malicious compliance', which is doing exactly what is ordered but not a single thing more. When, however, conflict or dissent negatively affect the workplace, and continue unresolved, those issues can safely be given voice through a conflict management system. This is the opposite of being stifled.

Conflict management systems should have meaning, not be token efforts that seek to manipulate employees into conformity. Employers can add real value to working relationships with a conflict management system that supports healthy workplaces. Some of the organizational considerations for creating a safe, accessible, effective, and appropriate conflict management system are:

Funding

No matter the size of the organization, there should be a process for following up on employee complaints, and ensuring that conflict management is fair. While paying for this is not the most important question to be considered, it is often the deal breaker. At the initial meeting about a conflict management system, ask whose budget is impacted by the conflicts that are causing the problems. The corollary to this is determining the budgets that will accommodate the conflict management system.

Staffing

In every workplace someone has conflict management skills to offer. Some have taken courses, some are natural peacemakers, and some want to know more about it. Finding the current expertise can leverage more expertise being found. Professional development is a benefit that can enhance the capacity for conflict management that already exists. There most likely will be additional resources needed.

Administering

Different workplaces have different amounts of bureaucracy. Some require a formal written request for accessing a conflict management system, and some start the process on the basis of a conversation. The degree of formality is usually a function of the organizational culture. Determining the amount of administration the process requires impacts funding, staffing, accessibility, and publicizing.

Publicizing

Once a conflict management system is written into workplace policy, it sends a message that the organization is serious about supporting employees managing and resolving their own conflicts. Knowing who markets it and how ensures that information about the conflict management system gets where it is needed.

Inputs

Information shapes the design and development of a conflict management system. The raw materials include data on what conflicts are a recurring pattern, where conflict management processes could be convened, how the processes will be evaluated, who monitors resolution implementation, where expertise exists for convening and providing the services offered, and ensuring the integrity of the conflict management system.

Outputs

Once a conflict management process is convened it will have some type of results. Implementing an agreement can have short and/or long term implications for change. Implementation needs as much attention as the design and convening of the conflict management processes. The outputs, or results, generate a feedback loop that can be used to improve the inputs, or design. Monitoring can require check-ins with the users over time, to ensure that the results are sustained, and the issues have been addressed.

Feedback

Any system benefits from evaluation. Something as sensitive as the emotional content of people's conflicts requires fine-tuning as people learn and offer their insights about their experiences using it. Determine beforehand who gives and who gets the feedback that the users offer. That will help the perception that the conflict management system has integrity. A conflict management system must be and must be perceived as responsive to the needs of the users.

Barriers

By the time employees have been in a nonproductive conflict for a while, they already understand the barriers to resolving it. The conflict management system designers need to know the obstacles that exist to successful conflict management, and how, where, and when to call upon those with the power or skill to overcome those barriers.

Power

The role of power in conflict management is often overlooked. The conflict management system designers should know who has what kind of power throughout the workplace. Power in conflicts may not follow the organizational chart. Exercises of power can take the forms of bottlenecks in workflow, or poor relations between employees who do not speak to each other, or refusals to take assignments or share information with certain co-workers, or sabotaging a project for revenge. Following the trail of power plays and power struggles is important data in designing the conflict management system.

Conclusion

Having these and other organizational considerations in alignment is key for any program success. Being in alignment means ensuring that the design fits the goals, the norms, the corporate culture, the formal and informal power structures, and the budget. If the conflict management system is in alignment with the workplace, it will provide, and be

provided with, systemic support throughout the organization. If there is alignment, everyone can be an advocate for conflict management.

3. Design considerations in developing a conflict management system

Workplaces that support employees managing their conflicts enhance employee retention, good faith, trust, competence, and productivity. A conflict management system adds value to any organization, but one size does not fit all. A conflict management system can achieve a few different objectives, so start with clarity of the desired outcomes. Then, be prepared for surprise outcomes, since a good resolution spawns unexpected rewards.

There are quite a few questions about conflict management system design to which ‘it depends’ is the right answer. Pinning down the specifics for a particular organization means gathering data. Some of the design questions are:

What is fuelling complaints and conflicts?

Finding people who know the histories of conflicts is not difficult. Providing a safe environment for them to discuss issues is important. Often, people will offer their information anonymously. When looking for conflicts’ fuel, more data is better. Thus, credibility or accuracy may not be issues, since the source of conflict is a matter of perception. The data can be triangulated to get more facts. Multiple disagreeing opinions of the causes of conflict can enlarge the conflict management system design options.

How are complaints and conflicts expressed?

The answer to this good question tells a lot about organizational culture. If complaints and conflicts are suppressed, silenced, or stifled, it suggests that the conflict management system might do better to emphasize confidentiality, and assurance that there would be no repercussions for using it. At the other extreme, if complaints and conflicts are expressed by shouting or threats, the emphasis might be on safety first, and psychosocial or structural adaptations that address interpersonal problems after. Knowing the current conflict management system reveals the gap between what is, and what is desired.

Where are the current gaps?

Since every workplace already has a conflict management system of some kind, analyzing what it is, how it is used, what types of issues it addresses, and who uses it, gives important data for comparison. Some organizations have a simple conflict management system – for example, every problem goes to the boss to solve. Other organizations have the opposite conflict management system –the boss is conflict avoidant so employees have no outlet for their issues with coworkers, workload, customers, or policies. Locating the effectiveness and appropriateness of an organization’s current conflict management system, is a measure of what can be leveraged, added, changed, or enhanced to achieve the desired conflict management objectives.

When would it be used?

There might be a cultural norm that no one complains until the conflict actually hurts too much to continue; what is called a ‘hurting truce’ or, ‘ripeness’. Data on when employees

try to find solutions is a measure of their willingness to access a conflict management system. Setting up a conflict management system with lowest (solve it yourselves) to highest (bring in an impartial person to convene a formal process) levels of engagement gives options for accessing it when the employees are ready.

What conflict management processes are effective, appropriate, and safe?

This is the most determined 'it depends' question. When all the data is collected, what makes the most sense for the common issues, workplace culture, amount of structural support, and degree of employee skill and acceptance? Since the range of conflict management options is so large, it is here that the designers can cherry-pick the processes to offer. A pilot project can test the design suitability before the conflict management system is widely implemented. If one design is not as effective or appropriate as hoped, the project does not have to be abandoned. There are other conflict management design choices that might be the right fit.

How would conflict management processes fit the culture and goals?

Some conflicts are the result of employees not fitting the workplace culture, and some are the result of the workplace culture being dysfunctional. The data from this investigation would help in the conflict management system design as well as in the overall workplace improvement program. By addressing conflict in the workplace, the conflict management system can point out structures, policies, workflow, customer service, employee assistance, and other programs or services that can be improved.

Who needs to learn the skills?

There is no 'it depends' associated with this question. Everyone and every relationship would benefit from better conflict management skills. Conflict analysis and management are life skills that have payoffs in customer service, employee relations, managing people, constructing difficult conversations, and enjoying family time.

Conclusion

Since the results depend on the conflict management system fitting the existing workplace, get the data for success. Without knowing where the conflict management system currently stands, it is more challenging to design the best system to meet current conditions and fulfill future expectations. Disappointed expectations are a major cause of conflict in the workplace and interpersonally. It is possible to make things worse by promising more than a conflict management system is designed to deliver, thus confirming employees' view that the negative unresolved conflict is unsolvable. If the conflict management system is a good fit, and meets the needs the data demonstrate, conflict management processes will not disappoint.

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