

Conflict Management Coaching: Making Conflict Management Everyone's Job

By Denton Whitney

All organizations abound with conflict—both overt and covert. Some people seem to enjoy the “battle” and promote power games, while others are so adept at trying to avoid conflict altogether or to accommodate others that accountability and feedback becomes a farce.

Often people believe that fighting, avoiding and accommodating are the only options for handling conflict. However these approaches tend to create dysfunctional cultures. Leaders and employees in your organization may even believe that it's *your* job alone, as an HR leader, to deal with disputes, minimize their liability, and create a positive culture. While these are essential parts of *your job*, in order to succeed you must make constructive conflict management part of *everyone's job*.

Because conflict management skills and approaches are so unique to each employee, individual coaching is essential for developing these skills throughout your organization. So how can you coach your organization to manage conflict more constructively?

Consider these four best practices:

1. **Create Comfort with Conflict.** When *you* are comfortable with strong disagreements, you can start to help individuals manage their own emotional reactions that lead them to fight, give up or run away. You can help people appreciate conflict as a vital key to success in healthy organizations. One tool to help you foster this appreciation is a questionnaire that assesses individuals' uses of different conflict management styles to help them start to recognize how they and others are responding to particular conflicts and to adjust their approaches to each situation.
2. **Focus on Facts.** Help employees focus on objective behaviors and outcomes. When conflicts escalate and emotions run high, even the most objective individuals become irrational and skewed judgments cloud actual facts. Coaching individuals and groups through these barriers requires a hedgehog-like persistence to discover the facts that build the foundation for effective and efficient decisions. Start by asking multiple individuals for their understanding of the facts, or ask for more concrete details until it is clear you have the facts necessary to help individuals and teams make informed decisions.
3. **Build Common Understanding.** Help individuals recognize the perspectives and interests of everyone involved in the conflict by rolestorming, which requires viewing the conflict from someone else's perspective. For example, have individuals reverse their roles: after sharing their own perspectives, ask each person to describe the interests and desired outcomes of discussions from the perspective of each of the *other* participants. Then invite them to confirm the accuracy and completeness of their descriptions with each participant.
4. **Commit to Create a Sustainable Solution.** Once the individuals you are coaching understand the issues from each others' perspectives, ask them to commit to develop solutions that, to the extent possible, will achieve results that will meet everyone's underlying needs. Establish a clear expectation that everyone will now fervently focus on *future* solutions. When dialogue reverts to past harms and potential problems, remind individuals of the agreed-upon expectation and ask repeatedly for their proposed *solutions* to meet *everyone's* interests.

Denton Whitney, JD, MBA, is a conflict management coach, mediator, and attorney at Selph Law, Ltd. He is an adjunct professor at Otterbein College where he teaches MBA courses on interpersonal communication, negotiation and business law. Denton coaches leaders on conflict management and communication skills to help individuals and organizations develop cultures of collaboration that

foster innovation and excellence. He has won numerous awards for his work in dispute resolution and interpersonal communication. Denton can be reached at dwhitney@selphlaw.com or 614-592-0859.