Five Steps for Handling Workplace Conflict

Almost anyone you talk to in the workplace has encountered one form of conflict or another. Conflict in the workplace is not uncommon, and in fact, in some instances it is even worthwhile. That's right. It can be worthwhile particularly if you can shift the conflict to make it work to your advantage.

You're at work. You've been assigned an exciting, highly visible project. You can't wait to get started. You arrive at your first team meeting ready to rock and roll. You take one look around and you immediately hone in on several scowling faces. Almost immediately, you are confronted and a conflict ensues. Your excitement quickly diminishes as you realize you have your work cut out for you.

Sound familiar? Maybe not exactly this scenario but I guarantee almost anyone you talk to in the workplace has encountered one form of conflict or another. You may experience this conflict one-on-one or in a team setting. Not to worry. Conflict in the workplace is not uncommon, and in fact, in some instances it is even worthwhile. That's right. It can be worthwhile particularly if you can shift the conflict to make it work to your advantage.

Why does conflict occur? Typically, conflicts arise when expectations are not met in some form, when one party perceives a threat to themselves in some way, or through simple miscommunication.

So, what can you do to manage conflict when it arises? Follow these simple steps.

1. Determine the cause. You can't solve the problem until you are sure that everyone has a mutual definition of the problem and that everyone is talking about the same problem. Gather as much data as you can. Ask for information and be sure to involve the impacted individual(s) in discussions. Ask "what else" questions to raise all of the issues and show a willingness to listen. Do not become defensive or personalize issues.

2. Collaborate on solutions. Use a "yes...and" response to focus and build on potential solutions. Avoid using a "yes. but" response, which tends to shift focus back onto the problem and away from solutions. Whenever possible, always engage key stakeholders in developing solutions. This will help facilitate buy-in when final decisions are made.

3. Provide alternative options. Whenever possible, provide choices. People tend to feel empowered when they are involved in the decision-making process. This will also help you in soliciting ongoing support and champions once the final decisions are made.

4. Communicate key decisions. Develop a communication plan that communicates the decision as many times and as many ways that you feel are appropriate. This might include meeting one-on-one with those involved, announcement at a team meeting, and an email announcement or written memo to follow-up. Be sure to involve your boss (and senior management or human resources when appropriate) to reinforce and support the final decision.

5. Implement solutions. Once a decision has been made, it is important that you be assertive in the implementation of that decision. When challenged (and do expect to be challenged) be calm, re-focus on the process used to identify issues and develop solutions, and be confident in the knowledge that you have done the best you can to resolve the situation. Don't get angry or over-apologize, as this will only serve to weaken your position.

Handling workplace conflict is never easy but it is necessary if you want to be perceived as a strong leader capable of getting things done. Avoid conflict and you put yourself on a path of manipulation and distrust. Handle conflict straight on and you will earn the respect of your peers, your staff, and your boss. Even more importantly, you will feel more confident and capable, no matter what situation you find yourself in.