

Welcome to the August 2004 edition of Bergeron Associates' newsletter. This month's newsletter features an article packed with practical tips for effectively resolving conflict. Healthy conflict usually results in better ideas and increased workforce effectiveness. Dysfunctional conflict can stop people and organizations from making progress. Even if you are not dealing with conflict at the moment, take a look at the suggestions, questions and statements designed to assist you when you do.

CONFLICT ENHANCES WORKFORCE EFFECTIVENESS

By Carol Bergeron

Healthy conflict can be of tremendous value to organizations. Productive resolution of conflict exists when two or more people, focused on a common goal, openly share their ideas and the thinking behind them. They identify common ground and areas of difference. They make the time to voice concerns, reflect and work through the differences until a solution is formed that they will support. Organizations benefit from solutions achieved through productive conflict resolution since they represent a range of perspectives and concerns and were arrived at in a way that solidifies the commitment of people. Highly effective people and organizations welcome and regularly engage in the practice of healthy conflict resolution.



In contrast, unproductive or dysfunctional conflict results in stalled progress or solutions that lack the genuine commitment of people. Unproductive conflict usually takes one of two forms. The first is conflict that is observable and may go on for so long or with such intensity that it slows or stops progress. The other form, "underground conflict", occurs when people withhold their ideas and concerns resulting in a solution that is formed too quickly and lacks commitment. Dysfunctional conflict, regardless of form, makes people and organizations less effective.

Try these tips and benefit from productive conflict resolution, then help others in your organization do the same.

1. Start with the goals and focus on what's important

Clear organizational goals provide a framework for people to recognize what is expected of them and determine how to best make valuable contributions. Getting up-front agreement and understanding on goals and relevant information is especially important when working with groups. Developing this practice:

- Creates a context from which ideas are objectively considered,
- Reduces wasted resources on irrelevant issues later on,
- Keeps the group focused and on track,
- Helps people see how their productivity impacts organizational results.

2. Recognize the type of conflict

The three most prevalent types of conflict include: "the what", "the how" and interpersonal style. "The what" conflict arises when there is disagreement on content. Perhaps there is disagreement on the definition of a problem, its' root cause or best solution. "The how" stems from disagreement on the process used to achieve an outcome. For example, a project team may agree on the problem and its' root cause but not on how to decide which of several solutions makes the most sense. Some team members want to vote, some want to come to consensus while others prefer the decision be made by the subject matter expert. Interpersonal style has most to do with people communicating with one another. Poor word choice and tone of voice, condescending conversations, mannerisms that show little respect and inattentive listening are examples of poor communication that lead to interpersonal conflict.

3. Identify and confirm common ground

Start with the positive. Find the common ground through conversation and articulate it for all to hear. Link the common ideas with organizational goals. Show how strong the connection is. This approach of connecting organizational goals with the ideas on which there is agreement will set the stage for re-using the approach when differences are addressed. Examples of statements that assist in identifying and confirming common ground include:

- “It sounds like we have agreement on ... Do you agree?”
- “The ideas on which we agree are ... and they support the organization’s goal to ...”
- “The data and facts support our joint conclusion that ...”

4. Understand the differences

The first step in understanding differences is to listen and ask clarifying questions. Your objective is to identify the differences and understand the thinking behind them. Keep an open mind to new ways of thinking about old problems. Once you fully understand others’ ideas and motivating factors, and they understand yours, then you can move onto creating a shared solution. Like you did when confirming the ideas you had in common, relate the ideas on which you disagree to organizational goals. Using the same approach helps to objectively rule out ideas or thoughts not connected to the goals. Try these questions:

- “Would you please explain the idea more fully?”
- “What assumptions have been made that are reflected in your conclusion?”
- “Would you please help me understand how your idea supports our goal to?”
- “What are your greatest concerns about this idea?”

5. Deal with solutions formed too quickly

Sometimes decisions made quickly by a group are welcomed so that immediate action or implementation may follow. Common sense comes into play as do the following questions you should ask yourself:

- “Has anyone held strong opposing opinions on this or similar issues in the past?”
- “What could be preventing people from sharing their ideas, concerns and objections?”

These questions will help when working with a group:

- “We seem to have limited perspectives on this issue. Are there other points of view we have not yet considered?”
- “We have come to agreement quickly. I am concerned that some ideas or reservations have not been voiced. It may be helpful for someone to take an opposing view to ensure that we have considered things from many angles. Who would like to do that for us now?”

6. Take a time-out

When a personal attack occurs, like name calling, or emotions run high take a time-out. Take a deep breath, count to ten or take a coffee break before continuing. When you reconvene, first address the attack then resume your discussion. It may be as simple as saying:

- “In order for us to continue in a productive manner, I expect you to stick to the issues and stop the name calling. If you agree then we can move forward. Do you agree?”

Sometimes the repeated misbehavior of others prompts certain emotions in us. Confront the person one-on-one. Make a statement that identifies the misbehavior followed by the feeling it instigates in you and end with a request for behavioral change. If the misbehavior persists then address it on the spot even if during a group session or if the same misbehavior is widespread among group members. Try using a statement like:

“When you provide me information piece meal rather than holistically, it makes me angry, reduces my trust in you and could result in inappropriate solutions for the organization. As we move forward, I ask that you give me the big picture up front so that I may contribute effective solutions.”

7. Establish a solution people will support

We have all been part of groups that successfully combined ideas to achieve desired outcomes. Why were they successful? Because the groups linked their ideas to organizational goals and stuck to relevant information. People were heard, understood and their thoughts mattered. The shared solution resulted from open minds and honest and direct conversation. It reflected varying perspectives and anticipated potential obstacles. Inappropriate behavior, if any, was addressed swiftly. Thus the objective of this phase is to build on previous phases and collectively create a solution that is supported. Helpful questions include:

“What idea, or combination of ideas, seems to make the most sense? Why?”

“What part of this idea are you uncomfortable with? Why?”

“What needs to change about the solution in order to get your support?”

“Are there suggestions for how we resolve our differences?”

“Are we all prepared to support this shared solution?”

At the end of the day, people want to be part of a winning team. Thus dealing effectively with conflict is an important skill to develop at all levels within the organization. Leaders have the most influence on how others handle conflict since employees will follow their lead. I hope you choose to help others take the path to healthy conflict resolution.

RESOURCES

Additional resources you may find of interest:

2004 & 2005 Schedule for Educational Workshops at www.bergeronassociates.com/calendar.htm.

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