



NEWSLETTER

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“I am more afraid of an army of 100 sheep led by a lion than an army of 100 lions led by a sheep.”

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand

Managing Conflict

Conflict in a group is natural. Leaders, facilitators, and managers must learn how to manage conflict. When managed effectively, conflict is productive. Conflict gives rise to expanded information exchange, surfaced rationales, more options, and better group decisions that enable change. Managed poorly, conflict destroys. The dominant motive involved is control. To effectively manage conflict, we must first understand it.

Wherever you see conflict, do you see it as:

- A battle to be won or a problem to be solved?
- Inevitable or preventable?
- Constructive or destructive?

Society places negative values on conflict at home, at school, and at work. Think about the first words or images that come to mind whenever you hear the word “conflict.” Are they positive or are they negative? We are not taught collaborative problem solving skills and generally try to solve “conflict” by

winning. Conflict is a source of energy – a change agent if properly channeled. Without conflict, no progress is made. Simply hearing, “I don’t agree.” or, “Let’s try something different.” is a sign of conflict. Conflict can appear as subtle comments or not so subtle actions. It exists when there are:

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This is an interim newsletter for email recipients only. It is longer than usual and devoted to Managing Conflict.

- **“Managing Conflict”** – Pages 1 – 6
- **Our New Public classes** – Page 7.

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Managing Conflict, Continued

- Challenges and attacks
- Silence and withdrawal
- Questioning of the status quo
- Emergence of problem people
- Loss of respect for time – such as lateness
- Sabotage attempts aimed at the group or a member of the group

Sources

Most people recognize when conflict involves them, but may miss it when it involves others who they work with or are responsible for. When you realize that conflict is present, don't ignore it and hope that it will take care of itself. Unmanaged, conflict can destroy or make the situation worse. Identify the source of the conflict. The sources of conflict in typical work situations include:

- Situations – re-engineering, reorganizations, automating jobs, changing responsibilities
- Difficult people – out of control, unable to excel or bond
- Ways people view others – biases, prejudices
- Listening filters – age, background, history with organization and each other
- Thinking styles – how people approach problems and solutions
- Fears – mostly fear of change or the unknown
- Habits – used to disagreeing or arguing, cultural
- Competition – feeling out of control or the need to control
- Misinformation – rumors, especially with change

- Semantics – understanding of words and intent
- Poorly defined objectives – misunderstanding of expectations
- Conflicting social identities – i.e., different social groups struggling to work together

Barriers

Once you identify the source, look for barriers to managing conflict. The first barrier – and one that exists in every situation – is listening. Whenever people become involved in a conflict situation, the first skill they lose is the ability to listen, “You're wrong so why do I have to listen?” The following are barriers that inhibit your ability to manage conflict.

- Ability or willingness to listen – yours and theirs
- Fears – yours and theirs
- Group norms – culture such as, “We don't discuss that here.”
- Image – unable to “back down”
- Lack of skill – a weak facilitator, manager, or leader
- Vulnerability – real or perceived threats
- Time – pressures can get in the way of effective decision-making
- Learned responses – our past is hard to unlearn

Skills Needed

If the barrier is you – i.e., your fears, your ability to listen – you can change that. Think about your perception of conflict and work to make it constructive. If the barrier is with others, you must use active listening

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to help them hear what they are saying and begin to hear what others are saying. Understand how you respond to conflict. To effectively facilitate or lead a conflict situation, you must keep conflict constructive and . . .

- Actively Listen – help everyone involved hear themselves and each other
- Know how to communicate acceptance – use it to open communication
- Understand social identities – learn how our identities affect conflict
- Learn how to confront – address the problem situation with diplomacy
- Understand anger – deal with yours and theirs
- Understand consensus (it is “win-win”) – do not look for compromise (it is “lose-lose”)
- Prepare properly – know that it’s coming so you have a plan to handle it
- Build a tool kit – use tools or exercises to build teams and diffuse problems

Listen and Communicate

Active listening is your most powerful tool in dealing with conflict. To actively listen, make contact with the speaker, absorb and process what is being said – without judgment, feed back what you heard, and check for confirmation. Proper active listening communicates acceptance – not agreement or disagreement. By communicating acceptance, you are showing the parties how to respect each other – the first step in learning how to communicate. In communicating acceptance:

- Encourage discussion of the issues and their feelings rather than statements about positions or demands. Understand

what is really important to each person. Find out the true “bottom line” and what sacrifices may be needed.

- Accept what people say and who they are. Do not ask threatening questions or react in defensive ways. Let them know that you understand how they feel and what they are saying. Write down their thoughts. Ask open-ended questions to get more details.
- When you listen to people, they are more prepared to listen to each other. Anger often dissipates and trust begins to emerge. Make sure that both you and the parties involved avoid communicating rejection. Rejection encourages defensiveness and blocks listening. Things that communicate rejection are:
 - interrupting or dropping out
 - ordering, directing, warning, threatening
 - lecturing, informing, preaching, or moralizing
 - blaming or judging
 - name-calling
 - cross-examining questions

Understand Social Identity

Everyone reacts differently in conflict. You cannot facilitate or lead a group through a conflict situation while treating everyone the same. How we view and define our “selves” affects how we need to be treated. How we define our selves is called our “social identity.” This identity

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must be taken into consideration when managing conflict in a group. While there is very little written about how to deal with differing social identities, the guidelines below are helpful:

- Conflict due to conflicting identities is not always easy to identify. If conflict happens, you need to use a lot of active listening.
- Get the group to talk – and listen – to each other. You need to get to the core of the problem so that the group can work it out. Don't ignore it or hope that it goes away. It won't. When groups hit identity conflict, they polarize into similar groups and put up barriers to others – self-protection of sorts. They need to talk and listen to break the barriers.
- Mix up the teams. Varying the makeup of teams helps people form alliances with everyone, not just a few. It also helps people get to know each other. Fear of social identity differences comes from ignorance. When they get to know each other, it starts to erode. Use an introductory exercise to help the team members get to know each other.
- Use strategic thinking – develop a common vision, identity for the organization. This broadens the definition of the social identity for this group – it helps incorporate the total identity. Common goals help to bring people together.
- Never ignore social conflict. It will get worse if you do. You must never condone it. Any sort of biased

comments, jokes, actions, or behaviors need to be addressed immediately. You can't just dictate "no tolerance", you have to enforce it and you have to follow these guidelines to prevent it (*communication is key to prevention*).

- To resolve issues, use a modified version of a decision-making process. Surface the issues – without blame. Have the groups discuss their feelings. Brainstorm to generate solutions. Select a solution and implement it. Review later to see if it fixed the problem.

Confronting

"A real leader faces the music, even when he doesn't like the tune." – Robert Half

Confronting problems and people is not an easy skill for many people. People avoid it because of fear, uncertainty, and concern that it will escalate to destructive conflict. Unfortunately, this leads to avoidance, denial, and a continuation of the problem. Others may confront poorly through uncontrolled explosions leaving emotional wounds, false success, and failure. People display various behaviors in confronting:

- Aggressive – the bully
- Non-Assertive – the wimp
- Assertive – the effective behavior

You must use the appropriate behavior for successful confrontation. Successful confrontation is, *"A face-to-face accountability discussion between two parties resulting in resolution and improved relationship."* To accomplish this, follow a

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three-step strategy:

- **Before** – define the issue fully; separate the issue from the person; recognize the pattern, its consequences, and its affect on relationships. Plan how to approach the person or persons and how to deal with their possible behaviors.
- **During** – approach the parties with respect; don't threaten; keep it safe; do not allow it to become personal; establish mutual respect. Do not attack. Make it something "we" need to work on. Use phrases such as:
 - "We need to ..."
 - "I feel ..."
 - "This is causing ..."

NOT

- "You are ..."
- "Your actions ..."
- **After** – follow up and confirm that the problem is resolved. If it hasn't, step back, rethink your approach, and try again. If it is resolved, summarize the resolution without finger-pointing to ensure that the issue doesn't erupt again.

Successful confrontation will turn conflict into a positive opportunity. The sooner you confront situations, the easier it is to keep them constructive. The longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes and the greater the chance for conflict to erupt into something destructive or build into anger.

Anger

To deal with anger, first know that it is as normal as any other emotion. We expect or want things to be better. Most people direct their anger at those who have control over them. Anger can be healthy and is different from hostility, which is not healthy. Often it is used to hide other feelings such as hurt, or disappointment. Learn how to deal with anger in others and in yourself.

In dealing with anger in others:

- Acknowledge and affirm the other person's feelings.
- Encourage the other person to talk about their anger. This helps diffuse the anger.
- Use nonjudgmental active listening. This lets the other person know that you care. Never get hooked yourself.
- Anger is seldom directed at you personally. You are just convenient.
- If you have contributed to the anger, let the other person vent before trying to explain or apologize.

In dealing with your own anger:

- Recognize the cause of the anger and identify other emotions you are feeling.
- Acknowledge and accept the anger. Do not deny it or it will resurface at the wrong time.
- Express your anger when it is safe and appropriate. Find safe outlets. Sometimes it even passes without having to express it.
- Deal with the problem that caused the anger and the anger itself separately. Do not make decisions when your anger is in control.
- In a workshop or meeting: take a break, take a walk, verbalize calmly, and

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reprogram yourself. Remember that anger can be modified.

Consensus

When people are involved in conflict, they generally want to “win.” When two parties are involved, to have them both win, you must reach consensus. Consensus is “win-win”. It is reaching a solution that everyone “can live with.” It may not be my favorite or your favorite, but we can live with it. It is not compromise. Compromise is “lose-lose” because to compromise, each must give up something. To reach consensus, we both must find an acceptable solution – something we can all live with. This can only be done when we look at the issues without bringing in personalities. Active listening is critical to hearing what is truly wrong and what is truly desired. Use effective decision making tools to help the group find a win-win solution.

Prepare and Build a Tool Kit

Conflict seldom appears suddenly. It builds. By being aware of what is happening, you will be aware that conflict is imminent. Be ready for conflict by having some tools handy: team-building exercises, decision-making processes, and keen listening skills. Be ready to use the tools if needed, skip them if not needed, or change them if something else is required. Thinking about how you handle conflict and confrontation ahead of time allows you to handle it effectively.

Summary

Never fear conflict. Be concerned about poorly handled conflict. Managing conflict successfully requires that you understand it.

When you are in charge, identify the source of conflict. Look for the barriers and plan how to overcome the barriers. **Listen.** Active listening is the most effective tool in managing conflict and turning it into something constructive. Realize that we are all different and our identities affect our ability to deal with others during conflict – either because our identity is part of the conflict or it affects the way we see the conflict. Confront conflict early and plan out how to confront it. Poor confrontation behavior or avoidance only makes the situation worse. Successful confrontation turns it around sooner. Understand anger and allow it to diffuse so that you can get to the source of the conflict without bringing in personalities or creating hostility. When managed properly, conflict can provide opportunities for creative energy and new ideas.

At MGR Consulting, we teach conflict management and confrontation skills in The *FAST* Facilitator Workshop and our Leadership Skills class. 

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Class	<i>FAST</i> Facilitator Workshop	Leadership Skills	Diversity – How Business Succeeds
Description	Our 5-day class that provides the finest and most comprehensive facilitation training available. The audience is candidate facilitators. This class confers 32 PDU's.	A 3-day class providing leadership skills and tools for the budding leader. This audience is anyone looking to become a leader. This class confers 18 PDU's.	Our newest class is a 2-day class that enables students to understand diversity and “inclusivity” as well as implement or support diversity programs. This class confers 12 PDU's.
Cost per student	\$2600	\$1890	\$760
Class Dates	May 8 – 12 July 10 – 14 September 18 – 22 October 16 – 20 December 4 – 8	August 14 – 16 November 6 – 8	August 17 – 18 November 9 – 10

Gary Rush teaches all classes.

All class fees cover training, materials, continental breakfast, lunch, and breaks. Hotel room reservations at the Majestic Hotel, 528 W. Brompton, Chicago, IL 60657 are made through MGR Consulting. Student pays own hotel and incidentals – a credit card is required to hold a room. Room rates and terms are listed on our web site (Public Classes). If you do not want to stay at the hotel, please let us know so that we don't make a reservation for you.

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