

— *Five* —

KEYS TO MAKING

WORKPLACE CONFLICT

WORK FOR YOU



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The Five Keys to Making Workplace Conflict Work for You

Anyone who has been involved in Workplace Conflict will know how destructive it can be. Morale and output can suffer. Employees can be damaged resulting in absenteeism, turnover and increased Workers Compensation claims.

Worse still, the conflict can affect your clients and prospective clients.

However, with the right response, you can use the conflict to improve the workplace.

There is no magic solution to resolving conflict but by implementing these five keys, you can address issues that come out of the conflict and strengthen your organisation as a result of the experience.

The Five Keys to Making Workplace Conflict Work for You

Key 1 Conflict is a Natural Part of Human Interaction – Expect It as Part of Normal Interpersonal Communication

Key 2 Understand the Nature of the Conflict

Key 3 Listen

Key 4 It's about the Issues Not the Personalities

Key 5 Concentrate on the Outcome: Turn the conflict in to a Learning Exercise



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Key 1 Conflict is a Natural Part of Human Interaction – Expect It as Part of Normal Interpersonal Communication

From an early age, we all learn different strategies to get what we want. We learn that conflict can be a useful tool for getting what we want when someone else wants the same thing or stops us from getting what we want. As we go through kindergarten and school, we develop more sophisticated ways of using conflict to achieve what we want. We (hopefully) also learn that co-operating and sharing are more powerful strategies to ensuring that our aims and the group aims are achieved and enhanced. We also learn the value of strengthening our relationships through working together to achieve desired outcomes.

Sounds nice doesn't it?

The reality, however, is that there are times when we want something despite the aims and needs of those around us. Sometimes, we don't want to help others or don't like them enough to put their wishes above ours. The trouble is that the conflict and the problems that it may cause would continue. In some cases, what is at stake is a matter of principle and standing up is the moral and ethical thing to do.



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Our natural reaction to conflict is to assume that conflict means that there is something wrong with the way the workplace is being managed. That is not the case! Conflict can happen in the very best organisations and can be an indication that there is a rich vein of new ideas to be explored. Conflict becomes destructive when it is not resolved. The conflict needs to be addressed to extract the learnings and to prevent possible damage.

Avoidance

The natural reaction to something unpleasant is to avoid it at all costs. We think that if we can ignore the issues for long enough, they might go away. Of course they don't. No matter how much the organisation tries to ignore or downplay or even punish those who are involved in the conflict, the issues will manifest in some form or other until the causes of the conflict are dealt with.

The conflict will often manifest in other forms. Employees will go off sick, turnover will rise and morale will go down. Have you ever walked in to a room and felt the poisoned atmosphere without hearing anything that was said? Now imagine doing that every day for months or years....

Avoidance doesn't work.



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Emotions

Conflict is one of the easiest ways to get everyone upset. Of course, extended emotional reactions become a significant barrier to resolving issues between us fallible human beings. An emotional response will often follow and may even be healthy at the start of a conflict but it quickly becomes counterproductive.

Scapegoating

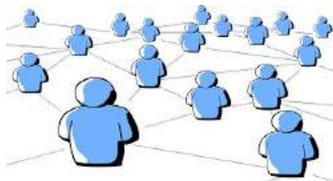
When things go wrong, we naturally look for someone to blame but conflict is rarely one person's fault. When we attach blame and take action against one individual, it is natural to think that the issue is resolved. Of course you haven't addressed the issues. It is even worse if you blamed someone inappropriately or someone who was on the receiving end of the conflict.

Even if someone was entirely to blame, you still have to deal with the fallout from the conflict.

Plan and Train

Every organisation has plans to deal with the things that the organisation wants to achieve and plans to overcome obstacles the organisation will confront. So each organisation needs to have a plan for dealing with conflict and needs to train its employees on how to act when conflict arises.

"If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail" Benjamin Franklin



Key 2 Understand the Nature of the Conflict

In order to resolve conflict, you have to understand what the conflict is about. Not every little detail but enough to be able to point those involved in the right direction. The trouble is that humans are very good at hiding the real cause of the conflict if they think that dressing conflict in party clothes will make it more attractive. If the real reason for the conflict would make them look bad, they invent other justifications.

There are essentially three different types of conflict:

- Conflict over ideas. Someone wants to do something that they think is incompatible with what someone else thinks is a good idea.
- Conflict over personalities. Let's face it, we like some people better than others. That is just part of normal human interactions. Certain people click and others just don't. The problems start when conflict is caused simply because someone doesn't like someone else or is jealous of their ideas. This may be immature but happens often enough where people put their own likes and dislikes ahead of the needs of the organisation. A manager may not want to become involved in a squabble but it is the organisation that is suffering and the work is being hampered.
- Bullying is fundamentally the misuse of personal or organisational power to damage another person. The motives can vary from jealousy to inappropriate management styles but the effect (whether the bullying is intentional or not) is to damage one or more individuals. The damage to those involved and the

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collateral damage can be enormous. Even if one individual is quickly and permanently silenced with the consent of the entire group, every member of that group now knows that they may be next.

Bullying is the one conflict that should be stopped in all cases and the behaviours should be addressed before looking for the causes of the conflict.

The problem everyone faces is that human beings are good at covering their tracks.

Conflict over ideas can be dressed as a personality conflict especially where one of the protagonists thinks that their idea is unlikely to be supported.

Conversely, conflict over personality can be cloaked as a conflict over ideas to make it look more respectable.

One of the best defences against the cloaked conflict is to examine each component of the conflict absolutely on its merits. Watch for the conflict morphing in to another form as the real causes are revealed!



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Key 3 Listen

We all hear but do we really listen? If you don't take the time to listen, you don't know what is really happening.

Who has the Time?

There are very few managers who have the time to sit through a protracted and potentially emotional description of a subordinate's woes. There are at least two sides to every conflict so the need to listen can be multiplied.

However it is even more time consuming to have to deal with the protracted fall out and damage to employees, the company and client relations caused by protracted unresolved conflict. Whilst addressing issues early may take more time than you really have, taking the time is usually a good investment.



Beware the First Complainant Effect

Often the first person who raises an issue will have the ear of the manager so that the second person to tell their side of the story can have the added difficulty of needing to disprove what someone else has said.

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The unfortunate reality is that someone causing issues may take the initiative and report their version first even if their version is the least accurate. It takes patience and discipline to hear the second person as though they too were starting from scratch. If you don't, you risk not understanding the issues.

Beware the Distortion of a Message Caused by Emotion

When someone is in the middle of conflict or of a bullying situation, they are likely to be emotional. However too often in our culture, we equate emotional with irrational. Don't confuse the two. Just because someone is emotional, or is having trouble telling you what has happened because they are emotional that doesn't mean that they haven't accurately understood what is happening.

Let an emotional person take the time to compose themselves and get the story out.

Other cultures handle emotion differently. For instance, in some cultures, someone raising their voice at you may be implicitly paying you a compliment because they are comfortable enough with you that they can reveal how they really feel.

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Effective Listening

The only way that you can be sure that you have understood someone is to repeat back to them what you think that they said. This is of course more time consuming. Again, however, responses based on flawed understandings are at greater risk of being flawed responses.

You can't effectively respond to what you don't understand.

"The art of effective listening is essential to clear communication, and clear communication is necessary to management success" James Cash Penney



Key 4 It's About the Issues Not the Personalities

Too often we understand those around us by who or what we think they are. This is very unhelpful in resolving conflict. The extent to which someone's actions are reasonable is a reflection of just that – what those actions were.

The issue is not the person

A problem can be much harder to resolve if it is framed in terms of what a person is. It is very difficult to "prove" that you are or are not the person described. Issues will be easier to address as a set of actions or behaviours that may or may not be appropriate.

It is natural however to describe those around you in terms of their personalities or character or roles you see them playing rather than the actions that they have taken.

You can only address issues not personalities

Personalities can be a significant problem in dealing with a conflict: If you raise issues with what someone has done in terms of a person's character or personality, they will be likely to be defensive, because it will feel like you are attacking their character.

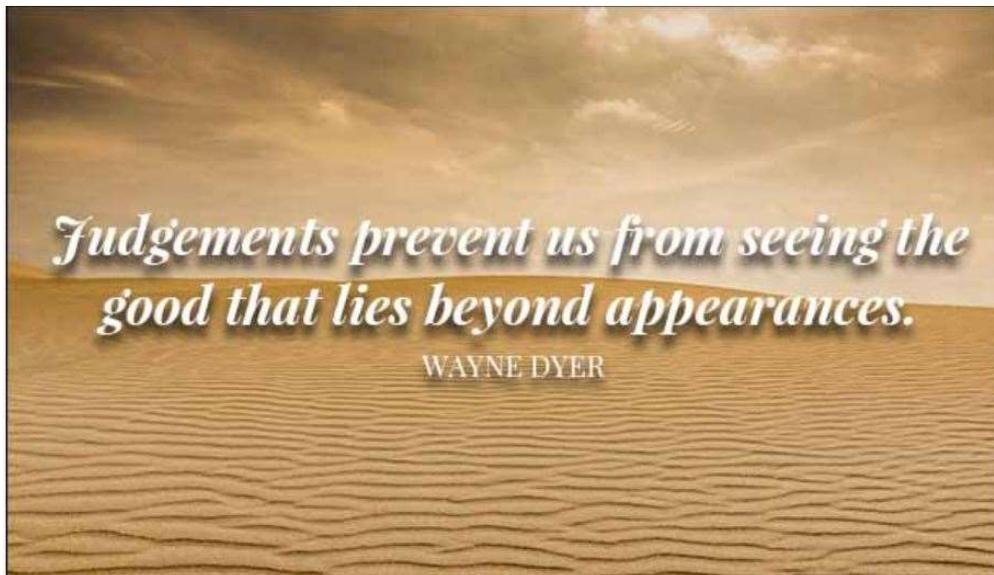
Conversely, someone acting inappropriately may deflect a complaint about what they have done by portraying it as a

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complaint about their character. This enables them to obfuscate the issue.

Moving Forward

In order to resolve conflict, you need to address what has happened and what should happen in the future. It is impossible to resolve something on the basis of what a person "is" or what sort of person they "are". The resolution will be in terms of what should be done in the future. Asking someone to change their nature won't work. It is both impossible to define what a changed nature is and impossible to rely on a changed nature to address future behaviour.



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Key 5 Concentrate on the Outcome: Turn the Conflict in to a Learning Exercise

Managers often fail to ask “what does the resolution of this issue look like”. You can’t implement a resolution when you don’t know what that resolution is.

Trip Planning starts with a Destination

When you go on a journey, it is obvious that you plan your route after selecting your destination. It just doesn’t work the other way around! How can you tell what road to take if you don’t know where you are going? Too often, however, conflict resolution efforts don’t plan based on the desired outcome.

It’s easy to see how it happens. Managers and participants get involved in the nitty gritty and want to get stuck in to the issue. But without a clear idea of what the resolutions of the issues looks like, you have no way of planning how you are going to make those resolutions happen. You need to plan your desired outcome as early as possible in the conflict resolution process. The destination may change but that is better than wandering aimlessly!



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Everyone Needs to be Considered

You need to consider the outcome for everyone involved. That can be a surprisingly large list! The bystanders who witnessed the conflict may need to be reassured of their position and concerns. Research has shown that those who witness bullying can suffer similar levels of distress to those who experience it.

Other stakeholders such as those from other parts of the organisation and even clients may have been drawn in to the conflict or may have seen its effects. It is the manager's job to minimise the potential organisational damage to these groups

The Learning Exercise

No matter what the form of conflict, it arose through a weakness or inefficiency in some aspect of the organisation. The only way to ensure that the conflict doesn't recur is to understand what those weaknesses were and to bolster the processes and plans to prevent them.

Conflict that is solely over ideas can be the most productive as the organisation can genuinely learn new ideas and improve their services. Most quality improvement systems encourage dissenting ideas for just that reason.

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Nerio Baldini is the Co-Founder and Senior Consultant with Enable Workplace Consulting. He has over 35 years experience dealing with workplace conflict in many industries and over a wide range on contexts. He has presented internationally in the field of workplace bullying and conducts regular training in resolving bullying and workplace conflict.