

## KEYS TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

First in a series

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### Introduction

Conflict in workplaces is common, and it has been estimated that managers spend 25-35% of their time responding to conflicts (University of Colorado, 2004). Bottom line costs are high, as well, even when conflicts do not result in litigation and employer liability, because the costs accrue from time and energy spent not only by the managers and directly involved employees, but also from lowered productivity and damaged morale among co-workers indirectly impacted by the conflict.

Costs are likely to be highest, of course, when inadequately-managed conflict leads to litigation or workplace violence, and the frequency of litigation is rising over time. The US Department of Labor (2004) reports that the number of civil suits concerning employment grievances grew over 400 percent in federal courts alone in the last two decades. Even when the employer is not found liable, litigation remains costly. For every dollar paid to employees through litigation, at least another dollar is paid to attorneys. Even when unresolved conflicts do not result in litigation, they contribute to costs via turnover of distressed employees, with each episode estimated to cost anywhere from 75% to 150% of the position's salary (Phillips, 1990).

For these financial reasons, as well as the harder-to-quantify but clearly profound effects of conflict-related stress and tension on productivity, it behooves managers to have available to them as many conflict resolution skills and tactics as possible. The remainder of this article, as well as occasional subsequent features, will highlight a variety of important conflict resolution principles and applications.

### Separating Topic from Stake

A common error in managing employee conflict is failure to separate the *topic* from the *stake*, causing the manager to miss the point of the conflict. Take the case of an employee and supervisor in conflict over the employee's tendency to arrive at work several minutes late on most days. The supervisor may present his extreme frustration that the employee has not responded to repeated verbal reminders to arrive at work on time, and may be heading toward using corrective action. The employee may be furious at the perception that the high quality of her work, and her willingness to work through break times or through part of lunch times, is being ignored by the supervisor in favor of a seemingly arbitrary and petty attention to the formality of the official starting time. If you, the manager, respond primarily or exclusively to the overt *topic* of this conflict (i.e., the employee's timeliness), you may end trying to help the parties negotiate items such as the maximum number of monthly late-arrivals that will be tolerated, or whether being seven minutes late is substantively different than being nine minutes late.

By contrast, if you conduct the process to understand the parties' *stake* in the matter, you may find out that, for example, the supervisor is new to the supervisory role and perceives the employee's late arrivals as a *threat to his authority that may spread to other staff*; and the employee perceives the supervisor's insistence on punctuality as a *disregard and disrespect for her workload management skills, her history of positive evaluations, and her need to get her children onto the school bus before leaving for work*. His *stake* in the matter is *the wish to know*

*that his authority is respected. Her stake is the wish to know that her positive work history counts, and that her employer cares about her need to balance work/life demands.*

If each individual's stake is clearly identified, you have the chance to help the employees resolve the real issues underlying the conflict, the ones that threaten to keep them in an adversarial, non-productive, and potentially litigious relationship. If the employees' true stakes go unidentified, you may resolve a superficial problem (e.g., "Agreed: the employee will arrive on time at least 75% of the time and will not be more than 15 minutes late at any time") only to grapple with ongoing and time-consuming discord between the involved employees.

How to identify the perceived stakes of individuals in conflict? Because the perceived stake is always a more heart-felt concern (e.g., *is this employee going to undermine my authority?*, or, *does this Johnny-come-lately supervisor not respect my work history here?*) than the superficial topic of the dispute, it may be necessary to speak to each employee alone before trying to address it with both employees in the room. Simple questions, if asked with respect and an unhurried attitude, will usually draw out the perceived stake. Those questions might include:

- o What are you most concerned might happen if this conflict isn't resolved adequately?
- o I can see how important this issue has become to you. Beyond the specifics, please help me understand what makes this important to you...
- o Conflicts are often about principles and commitments as well as about specific disagreements. What principles do you think are involved in the dispute you are having with [other employee]?

Subsequently bringing the parties together and facilitating a respectful shared acknowledgement of their perceived stakes may allow each party to recognize that the other also has deeply held concerns that go beyond the basic topic matter of the dispute, and may create some basis for identifying commonalities and rebuilding alliance between the two battling individuals (e.g., "you both care about the functionality and productivity of this organization. Let's build on that"). At minimum, identifying and expressing understanding and respect for each employee's perceived stake will contribute to your alliance with both parties, which in turn, helps keep both individuals committed to dispute resolution despite their anger at each other. Within this framework, you have a continued opportunity to enhance mutual understanding and to forge agreements that decrease the risk of grievances and the potential for costly and time-consuming litigation.

Coming up: Dislodging the dreaded "personality conflict".

#### References:

Phillips, DT (1990). "The price tag of turnover. Personnel Journal, p. 58.  
US Department of Labor, Archival Information, Employment Litigation and Dispute Resolution ([www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)).

"Resolving Workplace Conflict", University of Colorado at Boulder  
([www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs](http://www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs))