



## Management Assistance Program

### **CONFLICT AND PROBLEM SOLVING FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE: Dealing with Difficult People and Difficult Situations**

#### **GOALS:**

To help organizations, managers and employees:

- Gain insight into the causes of conflict and problems within the workplace.
- Determine which interaction styles are most effective in building relationships and completing tasks or goals.
- Provide strategies and techniques to help employees eliminate the influences of personal biases, perceptions and emotions within their conflict situations.
- Encourage all employees to use problem solving strategies when addressing any problems that require individual, co-worker, or group decisions.

#### **OVERVIEW:**

Conflict in the workplace is more common today than ever before. According to Working Dynamics™ it is estimated that more than 65% of performance problems result from strained relationships between employees and that between 30 to 40% of a manager's time can be spent reaching agreement with others when conflicts occur. Perceptions, attitudes, and emotions often overshadow the "real" issues and exacerbate everyday misunderstandings and disagreements. With growing workplace diversity also come additional viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences which can lead to increased misunderstandings and potential conflict. Most businesses today can not afford to allow conflict situations to remain within their workforce. The negative impact on morale as well as the breakdown in communication and teamwork can have a devastating effect on productivity and workplace safety. It is up to everyone in an organization to resolve conflict situations at all levels (that includes, between employees, between the management and employees, and between a department or an entire organization and its workforce).

Conflict resolution begins with a clear understanding of the sources creating conflict and a commitment to eliminating the root causes and re-establishing harmony. In some cases, conflict is generated by difficult individuals who do not work well with others. In other cases, conflict results from unresolved organizational problems and systemic issues which cause employee resentment and frustration. Many organizations are affected by both sources of conflict. It is up to the management team to determine which sources of conflict most affect their workforce and move into constructive conflict resolution and problem solving. Here are some of the key indicators that your workplace needs enhanced conflict or problem management.

- The employees do not treat one another with respect or common courtesy
- There are isolated but occasional aggressive interactions between employees which are more personal than professional and contain pent-up emotional energy
- Employees complain that their issues are not addressed and attribute “lack of appropriate resources” to many of their concerns
- Communication has broken down (or never has truly existed) between employees
- There are some degrees of discomfort among employees who sense the tension between co-workers or between themselves and management
- Employees indicate that they feel powerless, ill-used, or abused in their positions
- There are continual concerns regarding un-resolved problems or situations affecting the workplace or individual employees

### **OBJECTIVES:**

#### **1. Identify the behaviors most commonly associated with individuals who create, escalate and engage in conflict behaviors (Dealing with Difficult People in the Workplace)**

Some employees feel that they always have to be right or feel entitled to impose their views, beliefs and opinions on others in the workforce. These individuals often are the causal agents of workplace conflict and are often identified by the following behavioral traits:

- Aggression – Either outright confrontation or passive-aggressive response or action which gives mixed signals.
- Self-Importance – Believe that it is their mission to set the record straight or convert over to their point of view.

- Lack of Listening Skills – Do not listen to others who do not support their views. They will twist the words of their adversaries or take them out of context.
- Emotionally Overloaded – Load all arguments or complaints with emotional energy that escalates the issues and inflames their reactions
- Unreasonable – will not bend, alter their views, or listen to reason and will ignore facts that do not support their beliefs
- Self-Righteous– Make all issues a matter of principle and right versus wrong
- Low Self-Esteem – Want others to pay for their lack of strong self image – believe that putting others down makes them feel or look better than they currently do
- Dishonest – Use conflict and confrontation to hide some flaw or motive which they are unwilling to share
- Unprofessional – Allow personal feelings and perceptions about others or the organization to permeate their professional interactions and relationships
- Unclear Boundaries – Do not realize what behaviors are inappropriate in the work setting. Let their biases and opinions control their actions and interactions

## **2. Clarify the appropriate workplace styles and understand which styles are most effective for specific conflict situations (Dealing with Difficult Workplace Interactions)**

There are five styles of communication, behaviors, approaches, and interactions which can be applied effectively to different types of people and different situations. We choose these styles based on our own personal or professional goals and motives and our relationship to those other people or situations. Knowing which style to apply to a particular person or situation is critical to our success in achieving our individual goals. These styles include:

- Imposing – A win/lose dynamic
  - Competing, Bullying, Overwhelming, or Overpowering
  - Aggressive Behaviors, Prickly Personality, or Power Maneuvers
  - The goal – to achieve the task, complete the project, or dominate the relationship
- Accommodating – A lose/win dynamic
  - Giving-in, Nurturing, Appeasing, Serving, or Acquiescing
  - Passive Behaviors, Overly Attentive, or Subservient
  - The goal – to build the relationship, win approval, or earn trust

- Avoiding – A lose/lose dynamic
  - Walking away, Non-engagement, Self directed or pretending to listen.
  - Passive-Aggressive Behaviors, Ignores, or Remains Preoccupied
  - The goal – totally disengage from both the relationships and the task involvement
- Compromising – A 50/50 dynamic
  - Partial win, Partial satisfaction, Negotiation driven, or Contractual
  - Partially Assertive Behaviors, Limited Involvement, or Clearly Defined Boundaries, or Mutually exclusive
  - The goal – partial agreement for the sake of accomplishing the tasks
- Collaborating – A win/win dynamic
  - Total win for both parties, Complete satisfaction, Trusting Relationship
  - Assertive Behaviors, Total respect and Appreciation, or Mutually inclusive
  - The goal – full agreement based on high relationships, partnership, and common tasks

### **3. Define the tactics and techniques that are most effective in reducing or resolving potential and actual conflict situations. (Dealing with Difficult Workplace Situations)**

Not all workplace situations are the same; some are influenced by a long history of issues; some are tainted by problems which have not been resolved; still others are impacted by the organization's political dynamics. Knowing the background of the situation can be the most important factor in determining how to best provide resolution. Before you engage:

- Gather Information – know as much as you can about the past, present and future implications of the situation and its participants.
- Don't Make Assumptions – regarding other's motives, goals, perceptions, interests, attitudes, or intentions
- Deal with the facts – any other information is secondary
- Start with Compromise - Look for mutual goals, interests, concerns, or motivations
- Negotiate - through mutual concessions and perceived gains
- Aim for Dialogue – Communication without reciprocation is one sided

- Leave with Clarity – Regarding the Goals, Tasks, Relationship, or Expectations
- Create Future Opportunities – for open communication and trust building dialogue in all further interactions

#### **4. Encourage problem solving approaches to all organizational issues and personal dilemmas. (Dealing with Difficult Workplace Problems)**

Problem solving can be either a unilateral process (one person making the decisions based on their goals) or bi-lateral (two or more persons making decisions based on shared goals). At work sometimes both exist but the process for reaching those decisions can be the same. Here are some suggestions for obtaining effective problem solving:

- Identify the symptoms first – to determine the way the problem is affecting the individuals or the team
- List the problems – that seem to be creating the symptoms (notice that some of the symptoms may in fact be problems or some of the problems may be manifestations of bigger problems)
- Get to the root cause – Why do the problems exist? Where did they come from?
- Sort out the most difficult problems – determine which ones you might have to live with for awhile versus those that must be immediately addressed.
- Determine how they currently or will affect the participants
- Put together a plan – according to us we should .....
- Get consensus on the plan – and break it into meaningful and viable tasks
- Set time frames for completion of the tasks and resolution of the problem

### **SUMMARY:** Tips for Conflict Management and Problem Solving

- Recognize who you are interacting with when you are in conflict.
- Remember what your goals are when entering into a conflict situation.
- Realize where the situation is taking place (for example: at work, in a hallway, around co-workers or clients) before engaging the other person in conflict.
- Understand the difference between productive and unproductive conflict.
- Use different styles in working with different individuals and/or situations to achieve your goals.
- Do not get “stuck” in one style (such as imposing or avoiding) based on stress or frustration dynamics.
- Do not be afraid of conflict; it can be healthy when used appropriately.
- Develop the ability to accept different ideas, thoughts, and perceptions.
- Refrain from continuing to argue with individuals who demean you or get too emotionally charged.
- Go to the root cause of problems which cause conflict, rather than arguing over the symptoms. Find out why these symptoms exist.