A Better Way of Dealing With Conflict

Conflict Defined and Described

Conflict happens when two people disagree about something. Despite the fact that people have many similarities, everyone is different from everybody else, and people will have conflicts. Conflict is a natural part of life and happens often.

For example, if a driver coming the opposite way wants to turn the same way you do, that can cause conflict. Most of the time you agree almost instinctively on what each person needs to do. In another setting, suppose that your friend wants to play cards with you, but you want to go to a movie; or suppose that he or she wants to play golf and you want to go fishing—these situations can create conflict. How about choosing a place to spend the holidays? Shall you go to see your spouse's parents, your parents, both sets of parents, stay at home, or go someplace else? Perhaps you choose to go to each place for a different holiday throughout the year. Most of the time people work it out.

Conflict can be positive and healthy, as well as a learning and growing experience. When people deal with it in a healthy way, they can generally find a solution that satisfies everyone. This is what is called *managing conflict*.

Unfortunately, conflict also has its negative side, where people not only disagree with each other, but sometimes also hurt feelings and fracture relationships. The purpose of this information is to show you that there are options for finding a better way to manage disagreements.

Methods for Handling Conflict

Customarily, people handle conflict through *avoidance* or *position-based competition*. In the avoidance approach, people in conflict simply do not deal with their differences, for example, to keep peace in the family or in the office. This approach is useful if the differences are thought to be insignificant or if the people involved need time to "cool off." It may be nonproductive if the parties just let the conflict fester.

In the position-based competitive approach, people hold to their positions and try to prevail over the other person. This approach has two strains: the *power-based strain* and the *rights-based strain*.

In the power-based strain, people settle their differences according to who has more power. This is a legitimate and important way to handle conflict. For example, without a chain of command, a large organization or agency has no way to organize its efforts. Additionally, without good employees working efficiently to provide care and services, the organization cannot carry out its mission.

In the rights-based strain, the parties in a conflict refer to their legal rights as the basis for resolving their differences. If they cannot reach an agreement, they submit their claims to recognized authorities. The rights-based strain is also a legitimate and necessary way to handle conflicts. Where would people be without court systems and other grievance, complaint, and appeals procedures?

The problem with both strains of the competitive approach is that one person wins and one person loses. As a result, feelings may be hurt, relationships may be unnecessarily weakened or destroyed, and commitment to decisions may be weak. There must be a better way to deal with conflict than this.

There is a better way! People can work together on conflict management to increase the understanding and practice of *interest-based problem solving*.

Interest-Based Problem Solving

What interest-based problem solving (IBPS) means is that there are times when it makes sense for people who have a problem to sit down together to see if they can solve it by talking about their mutual concerns.

People who are in conflict with each other often have common interests. In the workplace, for example, common interests include the overall success of the organization, communication, teamwork, professional competence for everyone, quality, productivity, ethical treatment, and recognition of diversity.

IBPS has some significant advantages over the avoidance and competitive approaches:

1. The parties will be more likely to feel that the decision-making process has been a fair one.

2. The parties will tend to be more committed to carrying out the agreements made.

3. They are likely to have a greater understanding of, and respect for, each other.

4. If future conflicts arise, they will have an example to follow, making it easier for the parties to address the conflict and deal with it constructively.

5. IBPS often costs less in the long run than power- or rights-based strains. IBPS produces results and consistently maintains relationships between the parties. It may even improve the relationship.

That is not to say that all conflicts should be handled the same way. Some differences just are not that big a deal. Others may be caused inadvertently, and there is just not much that can be done about them. There will always be a legitimate need for avoidance and competition as solutions to conflict situations.

On the other hand, some disputes are big, important, and tough enough that it makes sense to address them directly. It is important to realize in such situations that you have not two, but three choices in how to do this: avoidance, competition, and analyzing interests.

Recap on How to Deal With Conflict

There are three primary strategies used to deal with conflict:

- **Flight**: Avoiding conflict and hoping that it will go away (avoidance)

- **Fight**: Using authority, rights, or force to attempt to prevail over others (position-based competition)

- **Unite**: Talking with other people to develop solutions that will satisfy mutual interests, and come to some result with which they all can live (IBPS)

Experience shows that people will be more successful in accomplishing their missions using various conflict management techniques. By improving how people deal with conflict, people can change the culture of their organization (or other setting) to remove some of the barriers in reaching their objectives.

If you treat people well and fairly, most of the time they will respond the same way. Also, if you treat each other honestly and fairly, you will create a friendlier working environment. Ordinarily, that can increase quality-driven productivity.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - Alternative Dispute Resolution. (Updated 2007, March 13). *A four-step way of dealing with conflict: Introduction*. Retrieved June 2, 2008, from http://www.va.gov

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