

THE P.E.A.C.E.© MODEL OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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A few years ago, a focus group of hiring and human resource managers identified communication, listening, diversity, and emotional intelligence as skills most valued by their organizations. One of the participants (a Human Resource manager at a fortune 100 company) stated that she estimated that managers spend approximately 45% of their time facilitating conflicts between people or groups, and therefore, conflict management skills were absolutely necessary for all leaders. Another participant, who is the Human Resource director at a regional financial institution, said that in today's market, people will find it very difficult to succeed in a management position without good listening and communication skills.

Additionally, another member of the focus group said people must be able to get along well with others. Teamwork and collaborative problem-solving skills are essential in today's changing work environment. He said, "At one time, we were looking for that shining star. Now, we shun the stars. We are looking for people who can play well together". When asked to choose one skill that they believe would benefit managers and help them develop and work with teams, they unanimously answered "conflict management skills". Additionally, they emphasized that in addition to facilitating conflicts, managers need to learn collaborative problem-solving skills that will help them in all types of situations, ranging from disagreements between coworkers to negotiating with labor unions to resolving conflicts with clients and vendors.

Introduction to the P.E.A.C.E.© Model

Workplace conflict can create stress, destroy morale, decrease motivation, and reduce job satisfaction if it is mismanaged or unmanaged. Given the negative consequences of conflict, I believe that most people do not choose to exacerbate these behaviors. They act or react because they do not have the skills to deal with conflict in the workplace. When people learn more productive ways to interact, they can communicate differently, and workplace relationships can improve. The framework of this skills-development conflict management program is built on the precepts of conflict resolution and transformation, including perception clarification, empathetic listening, appreciation of diversity, collaborative problem-solving, and emotional intelligence (P.E.A.C.E. ©).

For interventions to be effective, they must address the root causes and antecedents of the conflict. Communication and perceptions are at the root of almost every conflict, so these are fundamental components of any conflict management workshop. Additionally, self-awareness, empathy, and emotional intelligence have a positive effect on conflict situations. Self-awareness helps people become attuned to their emotions so they understand the motivations behind their actions and communications. Likewise, empathy allows people to understand other people's feelings and view the world through their lenses. Finally, when people understand the role emotions play in their responses, they are less likely to react to negative situations in a destructive manner.

Although presented separately, the precepts of P.E.A.C.E.© are not linear. In fact, they overlap and build upon one another. For example, perceptions are clarified by empathetically listening, appreciating diversity, and employing emotional intelligence. Each of these will support collaborative problem solving, which is more respectful, satisfying, and empowering.

Perceptions

Conflict, like death and taxes, is inevitable, and the workplace is a breeding ground for unproductive conflict. Consider that organizational culture consists of shared values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and norms. Add to that the fact that organizations are complex coalitions of individuals, departments, and divisions—each competing for perceived scarce resources, such as funding, access to those in power, and time. Stir in a little power imbalance and organizational political posturing, and you have a recipe for unproductive conflict. Then, remember that today’s managers are faced with diversity and cultural issues ranging from race and gender to individual heritage, values, and beliefs. Shake all that together and you have a workplace that is bubbling over with conflicted people and situations.

Although 30-40% of a manager's daily activities are devoted to dealing with conflicts, many people are ill-equipped to manage these issues. The good news is everyone can learn skills that will improve communications, transform relationships, and enhance quality of life at work. The basis of this transformation is perception clarification. Since we construct our reality based on experiences, we have different perceptions about how conflicts happen, why they occur, and what it takes to resolve them. On the path to perception clarification, ask

- What is the lens through which we view the situation?
- What are our individual and shared needs?
- What role did each of us play in the conflict?
- Have we listened well and asked illuminating questions?

Clarifying perceptions is the first step in transforming conflict situations from stressful to successful. Meanings, perceptions, and responses to conflict are constructed based on an individual’s social realities, experiences, and cultures. Interventions that help employees clarify the perceptions of the intent of a co-worker’s behavior, as well as the effect their own behavior may have on others, can reduce negative conflict. Clarifying perceptions may halt the escalation of interpersonal conflicts.

When dealing with workplace conflicts, many people employ antisocial interpersonal actions against their coworkers because they perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, or interference with individual aspirations. Including perception clarification in the intervention can help employees understand the differences between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, the impact their individual behavior has on others, and the interdependence of employees’ interests. This may help to alleviate unproductive workplace conflict. In fact, when perceptions are clarified, opportunities for positive change and growth are likely.

Empathetic Listening

One of the most powerful tools we have in our conflict management toolbox is empathetic listening. Humans have a compelling need to be understood and respected, and being an empathetic listener is a clear sign that we understand and respect the speaker's perceptions, ideas, and feelings. Empathy allows us to understand what that person feels and experiences. Empathetic listening requires us to listen to understand, rather than listen to respond. When we suspend our own ideas and agendas and empathetically listen, we will hear the underlying meaning of the message, rather than merely the spoken words. Not only will empathetic listening enhance interpersonal communication and transform relationships, but it will also help us uncover and address root causes of problems that exacerbate conflicts.

Since many conflicts are rooted in assumptions based on personal history, background, or biases, messages are often filtered through those assumptions. If people learn to empathetically listen to others, relationships can be transformed. Although listening to the other person's perspective does not eliminate the conflict, not listening will intensify it. Moreover, when people learn to actively and empathetically listen, they can uncover and address emotions that influence perceptions of the conflict.

To improve your empathetic listening skills practice giving your full attention to the speaker, engage your total body by facing the speaker and maintaining eye contact, watch the speaker's body language, acknowledge and address emotions, and ask questions or make comments that draw out the speaker's ideas and feelings.

When we listen empathetically, we engage our hearts, not our minds and ears. When we are able to accomplish this, we will identify and address emotions that influence perceptions of the conflict, uncover the true meaning of the communication, and enjoy more productive outcomes.

Appreciating Diversity

Within organizations, diversity is the mosaic of genders, ethnicities, ages, personalities, communication styles, and educational levels. Diverse work groups not only design more innovative products, processes, and services that address the multiplicity of needs from their diverse and global customers, but they also present a wealth of ideas and insights that can lead to creative problem-solving and decision-making. From a human resource perspective, organizations with a reputation for appreciating diversity are likely to attract and retain qualified and motivated employees.

Even though diversity can have numerous organizational benefits, divergent views may result in interpersonal conflicts. However, part of a manager's job is to help the contrasting pieces of the mosaic work harmoniously together and to make the best use of each employee's unique talents and abilities. In part, conflicts may be moderated and harmony may increase when managers model appreciating diversity. This starts with respecting themselves, others, and the differences that create the mosaic. It is also important to become self-aware and not allow one's hot buttons to be pushed. In addition, diversity dialogues provide opportunities for education, exploring differences, and sharing experiences. These diversity dialogues increase mutual understanding, clarify misinformation, and stifle the spread of bias. Finally, maintain a sense of humor because

when that disappears, it can take our humanity with it. When diversity is appreciated, it can be a source of harmony and organizational growth. Managers who model their appreciation of diversity help to create a vision, build awareness, inspire others, and facilitate positive organizational change.

Collaborative Problem-Solving

Given the challenging economic times many organizations are facing, organizational leaders are forced to review and change policies, procedures, and strategies. Change, while not always welcome, is inevitable if organizations are to survive and thrive. Paradoxically, change is both an antecedent and a consequence of conflict. It leads to exciting opportunities to transform relationships or revolutionize practices, and when the change is properly managed, the workplace is more collaborative and harmonious. Unfortunately, when changes, and the resultant conflicts, are mismanaged, the well-oiled organizational machine can sputter and stall on the side of the road. Disputes, sabotage, inefficiency, and low morale are all warning signs that unproductive conflict is about to halt a firm's progress.

In times of change, hierarchical management styles are less effective. Teamwork is the norm, and in downsized firms fewer people are asked to do more with fewer resources. As a result, companies are looking for better ways to accomplish their vision and goals. One of these approaches is collaborative problem-solving.

When implementing collaborative problem-solving strategies, consider these suggestions by Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Project on Negotiation:

- Separate the people from the problem
- Focus on the interest, not the positions
- Generate a variety of options before deciding what to do
- Insist that the solution be based on objective criteria that is linked to the organization's vision and mission

Adopting a collaborative approach to conflict identification, containment, and management can provide a spark that ignites creativity, innovation, and improvements in dynamic organizations.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotions are a part of life, and employees do not check them at the door when they enter the workplace. Unfortunately, in many organizational cultures it is taboo to express or acknowledge emotions, and as a result, these unacknowledged feelings can create tension and exacerbate conflict. Rather than ignore the inevitable, recognizing emotions of anger, fear, shame, and sadness can help organizational leaders effectively deal with them. By becoming aware of and sensitive to the underlying feelings of their co-workers, leaders can make more appropriate responses to potential conflict situations. Incorporating emotional intelligence skills into training programs may help individuals become compassionate. Emotional intelligence is defined as the intelligent use of

emotions, and emotionally intelligent individuals are able to recognize their own emotional reactions, as well as decode others' emotions. When emotions are properly managed, constructive communication improves trust, loyalty, and commitment increase, and job satisfaction and motivation are enhanced.

Emotional intelligence encompasses a myriad of skills and traits, including flexibility, empathy, optimism, and self-actualization. Leaders who are flexible are resilient and adapt to the inevitable, unpredictable, and fluid circumstances of life. Often people are inflexible because they fear failure. Let go of fear and embrace the wonders of transformation.

Empathy is another emotional intelligence skill, and it is often quite misunderstood. Refrain from saying "I know exactly how you feel", because that is impossible. However, being aware of and sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others creates openings for better communication and more collaborative problem-solving. The key is to be mindful of others and view the world through their lenses.

Emotionally intelligent people are optimistic, seeing the half-full glass. Defeat is merely a temporary setback, and the focus is on the possibilities, rather than the problem. Be grateful and view obstacles as lessons to be learned and opportunities for transformation.

A final trait associated with emotional intelligence is self-actualization. Shakespeare had the right idea....."to thine own self be true"! Find ways to grow and actualize your talents and abilities.

Most importantly, remember that these are skills, so they can be learned and honed with practice. Becoming emotionally intelligent is a journey, not a destination, and the first step of the journey is the desire to improve.

Conclusion

Employees who understand their own reactions and learn how to respond to workplace conflict may experience higher levels of job satisfaction, improved self-confidence, less stress, and increased motivation. You cannot change others; you only have the power to change yourself. Therefore, the focus of the intervention is on changing one's own behaviors and reactions to workplace conflict. The P.E.A.C.E.© Model of Conflict Management has been presented at multiple workshops with anecdotal success. The next step is a research project to determine how and why it can help individuals and organizations manage inevitable conflicts.