

Successful conflict management

By Abe Tamayo, Major –

Conflict has existed since the beginning of humanity. It is prevalent in nature and reveals itself in day to day life. Conflict is not always bad, and is often healthy. Yet it is in the proper management of conflict that positive outcomes are realized for all.

“Whenever you’re in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it,” according to William James of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). “That factor is attitude.”



The most common error made in conflict management is to allow the issues to fester and boil over, anchoring it in emotion, embedding the feelings associated with the conflict to prevail over potential resolution.

According to SHRM’s guide on conflict resolution for supervisors, five basic characteristic steps exist when dealing with managing conflict:

Competing: The competing method is used primarily when unilateral decisions must be made with little to no added contribution. It is a method recommended for quick decision-making and in making unpopular decision. This method sequesters debate among the parties.

Collaborating: The collaboration method solicits the input of team members, gathers buy-in and solidifies relationships. Unlike competing, it is an inclusive decision-making empowering party members who are seeking a resolution, but are unable to decide upon a solution outcome.

Compromising: Compromising methodology allows the process to generate a win/win solution to the conflict. This method is best applied in settings where the issues are of moderate to high importance, or in finding solutions with equal power and strong commitment on both sides of the table.

Avoiding: The avoiding method is best used when conflict is not work related. Avoidance is a decision not to address or handle the conflict. It is best used in settings where the issues are minor and unimportant. It may buy time to settle the conflict in issues which are more symptomatic, rather than pertinent to resolution.

Accommodating: There are times when allowing the “other side to win,” is the method of choice. Accommodating helps maintain perspective and in actively deciding what is of importance and not. When used properly, accommodation creates goodwill and keeps peace among parties.

Each of these methods may be used individually or in hybrid form, but regardless of the methods chosen:

Realize that conflict exist and is inevitable. Move quickly to address conflict by focusing on the problem, stay open to suggestions and solutions, listening actively.

Do not focus on personalities, interrupt, attack, dismiss feelings or avoid the conflict. Avoiding the conflict only allows it to fester, resulting in added ill effects.

When seeking resolution, consider the following steps:

1. Clarify the agreement.
2. Establish common goal for both parties.
3. Discuss ways to meet the common goal.
4. Determine the barriers to the common goal.
5. Agree on the best way to resolve the conflict.
6. Acknowledge the agreed solution and decide the responsibilities each party has toward resolution.

“It is important to note that there is no one way to resolve a conflict and often managers will need to utilize multiple methods in order to reach a resolution,” writes Thomas-Kilmann in Conflict Mode Instrument.

It's important to consider that most people can accept results less than desired so long as they are a part of the process in determining the outcomes.