



Reach your potential

Conflict in the Workplace

By Dr. Reggie Thomas, President
PeakePotential, Inc.

Conflict is very uncomfortable, and if you are honest, you will admit that you feel stress when you are in a conflict with another person. You will find conflict everywhere – home, community, neighborhoods, church, social media and any social institution. Many business leaders spend a great deal of time managing conflict in their organizations. Instead of investing time in positive and constructive tasks, they are putting fires out. Conflict in the workplace erodes morale and culture, breaks down teamwork, reduces productivity and creates an unhealthy organization. How do you manage conflict in the workplace.

First, it is important to understand the nature of conflict. We typically define conflict as negative. Conflict is **normal**. There is nothing abnormal or out of the ordinary about conflict. Relationships will often encounter conflict because individuals are different and have different beliefs, experiences and perspectives. Conflict is **natural**. It comes with living in community. The workplace is a micro-community. It is a community of people working together, which includes collaboration and decision-making. Sometimes there will be disagreements about how work is to be done or decisions to be made. Conflict is **neutral**. In other words, conflict is inherently neither bad nor good. We tend to label conflict as something bad, but conflict is not always bad. In fact, some of the best work and decisions can emerge from conflict. What makes conflict bad or good is what we do with it and how we utilize it. Conflict should be **narrow**. When addressing conflict, it is important to keep the discussion specific to the primary issue. Do not go global in scope. Focus on the issue creating the conflict and solutions that will resolve it. Conflict is **negotiable**. It exists between two individuals or two parties who possess the capability to negotiate through their conflict. That is the good news! Conflict can be worked out. I have found that in the collaboration process, each person or party has their opinion. Negotiation means that there is an abandonment of ‘my way’ and ‘your way’ and we think of a ‘third way’. I have learned from my experience that the ‘third way’ often is a much better idea than either party’s idea. Conflict sometimes creates creativity. Without the existence of the conflict, a better way of doing things might not have emerged. In the workplace, make sure to work through the hard discussions and decisions. If you debate and collaborate with an open mind long enough, you might surprise yourself. You may discover better ways of doing business and better options for making good decisions.

Second understand that there are different levels of conflict or degrees of conflict. Managing conflict requires examining the conflict. This examination not only includes



Reach your potential

isolating the primary issue, but how intense the conflict is. Author Speed Leas talks about the 5 Levels of Conflict. They are as follows:

- Level 1 – A problem to Solve
- Level 2 – Disagreement
- Level 3 – A Contest
- Level 4 – Fight/Flight
- Level 5 – Intractable Situation (Point of No Return)

I wish there was space to fully unpack these various levels, but let me summarize the concept. Level 1 is least severe with Level 5 being the most severe. The journey between a 1 to a 5 increases in emotions and intensity. The conversation becomes less objective. Rather than addressing the issue, the other person or party becomes the issue. The conflict becomes very personal. **Conflict cannot always be resolved, so it is important to work on reducing the conflict.** In other words, if there is a conflict in the office and the intensity is a 3, work on moving it back to a 2.

Third, understand the different styles of managing conflict. Each person has their unique preference of managing conflict. The five basic styles are avoiding, accommodating, compromising, collaborating and competing. Each of us has a default style. It is important to know your default style. It is equally important to know the style of your work colleagues. This knowledge will equip you for reducing specific conflicts that you are in at the workplace. **Here's a tip: your default style will not always work.** Each conflict that you face will involve a different person, party, issue, problem or decision. Learn how to utilize each of the conflict styles.

Conflict resolution, mediation and utilization often require a professional to come in to navigate a process. Again, a particular conflict may not be possible to resolve. In that case, a work team has to find ways to utilize the conflict to foster better teamwork, creativity and productivity. A trained facilitator will assist you with accomplishing that. PeakePotential specializes in conflict management training, mediation and utilization. If your business or organization would benefit from this service, contact me at reggie@peakepotential.com or 714-944-1031.