

The 5 common myths about workplace conflict



by Adam Goldstein

Managed correctly, conflict can be a positive source of innovation and creativity. Here are five myths about workplace conflict (plus tips on how to harness its power):

1. Conflict is always negative and should be avoided at work. Quite the contrary. When problems are hidden or masked, they aren't solved. They fester and grow into bigger problems. Conflict has to be acknowledged and addressed.

A big misconception about conflict is that it's a negative force. Workplace conflict is often creativity trying to happen, and savvy organizations look for ways to embrace and optimize conflict.

Employees close to the work often have great ideas for better solutions. Help them brainstorm these ideas, and then evaluate and prioritize them.

2. Difficult people are almost always the cause of conflict. While bad behavior is certainly a contributing cause of conflict, failing to set realistic expectations is a big contributor. If people don't understand what the organization, their manager or their teammates expect, confusion and conflict can result.

Set expectations early, beginning with the job interview. Let people know what the job entails and what success in the role looks like.

3. The problem at the root of a conflict is usually obvious. Problem solving is central to managing conflict, but the problem can't be solved until it's identified. Getting to the source involves dialogue, conversations and some detective work.

There are a number of skills and techniques you have to employ: attending skills which put everyone on an even level; encouraging skills enabled others to elaborate; clarifying skills to reduce ambiguity; and reflecting skills to restate in your own words what you've heard the other person say.

4. In conflict, there are always winners and losers. A position is a stand we take in a negotiation or

conflict. It is what we demand from the other person. Interests are what we really want—our needs, desires and concerns. When positions become the focus of the conflict, the problem can get covered up along with any solution. Focusing on interests, rather than positions is more effective. Think about your interest and then separate your position from your interest.

Also, consider the other person's prospective. Stand in their shoes and contemplate what they really want.

5. It's a manager's responsibility to fix problems on her team. Unless a problem involves behavior or performance that needs to be addressed, a manager doesn't necessarily own it—the employees do. When managers intervene and exert authority, employees miss the opportunity to develop their own conflict management skills. Employees need the freedom and authority to solve problems that relate to their work.

A guiding principle—in fact, a golden rule—of conflict resolution is that the problem should be solved by the individuals who own it.