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Conflict Management Part 1 – Conflict Recognition*By Scott E. Byorum, Nationwide Real Estate Tax Service, Inc.*

*“No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” ~
John Donne, 1624*

Conflict in the workplace isn't just two people screaming at each other. It can be overt, but it can also be very subtle. Recognizing the problem is the key to resolving the problem. This four-part series covers some basic understandings of the subject and why it should be a topic of concern for all organizations.

No person is an island nor operates in a vacuum. When two or more people in an organization are engaged in conflict, everyone is involved. This being for the simple reason that everything we are thinking or feeling is affecting the way in which we engage with others, and those interactions affect others. Like a stone tossed into a pond, the ripples spread far and wide.

Conflict is going to happen for the simple fact that humans are imperfect and they have different perceptions, ideas, experiences and coping mechanisms. So, acknowledging that it does and will exist allows us to choose between the two flavors of conflict: working to make it constructive and allowing for it to strengthen an organization; or allowing it to become destructive and fuel a toxic and dysfunctional environment.

Firstly, it is important to recognize that emotions are inherently a part of conflict. You will not resolve issues by telling people to not get emotional. You might as well tell them to stop breathing. Suppressing attempts to control or eradicate conflict is likely to inflame it, as any loving (or unloving) couple can attest to. Instead, recognize that emotions (even seemingly lack thereof) are indicators of importance and can be used as energizers in finding solutions.

Next, the concept of “personality clash” is by and large a myth. Applying this concept is a convenient out. It makes it easier to write off the importance of the conflict or use it as a means to separate individuals as a solution. Some people do have difficulty in getting along, but that's usually because they are not communicating in a way that adequately conveys each other's concerns so the other can understand. In addition, they are working with other people in the organization.

And therein lies the rub. The ripple effect. Other people are usually involved. The visible problem (two people not getting along) is rarely the actual problem. The actual problem is likely systemic. Individuals in conflict are often visible figure heads for camps within the organization. The “personality clash” excuse ignores the role of others, the problem gets misdiagnosed and often misaddressed, and the problem rears its ugly head somewhere else and/or in some other form, and is in danger of further contaminating the organization.

When your organization focuses on the systemic causes of conflict, you begin to identify its structural and procedural origins and you become less distracted by the emotional power plays

used by dueling sides to make theirs the valid point. Systemic considerations involve everything that the organization is comprised of:

- The facilities and equipment
- The processes and the rules
- The workload and its distribution
- The method and modes of communication
- The expectations and feedback loop
- Management structure and training practices
- Workplace culture and atmosphere

Notice that all of these things cue employee behavior, depending on how well they are structured, defined and deployed. And, you guessed it, behavior is the major factor behind conflict. For instance, if your business keeps hiring unqualified people for the job, the root cause of conflict isn't the people...it's likely your hiring and training practices. Similarly, if the organization is constantly awash in gossip and rumor and backstabbing, disciplinary actions or moving people around may exacerbate the problem. Instead, you may want to look to your communication methods or the openness of your organization and the availability of management.

Dealing with conflict in the workplace can be complicated, difficult and sometimes messy, even for highly trained individuals. There are plenty of good resources available on the web that can provide in-depth and multi-faceted training for managers and employees alike. Consulting an accredited HR administrator is highly suggested.

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