Conflict inside an organisation can seriously weaken its ability to stay in touch with customer needs and deliver satisfaction. A customer rang to query a retailer's failure to deliver her new washing machine that morning. The service representative replied that she had no contact with the delivery van and concluded 'It was due today, that's all I can say.' Afterwards the representative complained to the warehouse 'That's the sixth call I've had today; I wish you'd get yourself sorted out.' With that came the reply 'If you didn't keep interrupting us we'd be able to get the deliveries out on time.' The heat and energy generated in this interchange was not applied to sorting out the customer's problem. We could repeat scenes like this in almost every organisation, with varying degrees of disruption and hostility. Even at the highest level damaging conflict can break out; some years ago the Chairman and Managing Director of a blue-chip company were asked to resign after the two simply could not work together.

Failure to resolve internal conflict directly impacts on the customer. Unresolved conflict can lead to poor staff morale, rivalry and bickering. Most importantly, it diverts attention away from the customer, who can be left feeling annoyed and bewildered at the staff's lack of helpfulness. Yet the majority of companies do little to prepare their managers or staff to recognise and successfully deal with conflict, both within the organisation and outside it, so the advantage lies with those who prepare themselves to be skilful in this difficult, and often uncomfortable, area. One company that has managed conflict successfully is G.E., who transformed the business through regular open Work Out sessions to flush out differences and ideas in a no-holds barred sessions. In this article the authors describe how to tackle conflict as a development opportunity, not as something to be ignored. Well managed open debate, where differences are deliberately brought out into the open can be very positive in facilitating exploration of the terminology and problems as well as flushing out underlying discontent. It tests out solutions and at the same time can promote common values and mutual respect.

**Four Stage Framework**

There are four distinct stages in resolving conflict and attention needs to be given to each of these areas. The process starts with having a practised eye at recognising conflict and assessing its growth potential early on. It needs an assessment of who is involved and what are the causes, then the ability to make plans for a suitable response, together with the skills in implementing that response and reviewing the success of the intervention.

**Stage 1 - Spot the Signals**

The first stage must be to spot the signs that damaging conflict is beginning and has the potential to get out of hand. These signals may be
• Customer service is deteriorating, as other internal and personal goals, such as settling scores, become of overriding importance
• Groups are split into opposing camps
• A person is being persistently attacked and this is diminishing their contribution
• Differences or debates drag on and don't get settled

Conflict may manifest itself as fights, fuelled by emotion, debates and discussion - sometimes rational, sometimes passionate, where there is argument on the basis of facts, opinions and values, and lastly competitive game playing and rivalry. There is a need to identify all the parties involved since there may be covert players hiding in the wings.

The danger signals which will be seen are that you will begin increasingly to hearing words such as 'It's not fair,' 'I don't agree,' 'What you don't understand is.' 'That's your problem.' Comments will be getting increasingly personal, there will be frequent interruptions and lack of listening and you may see some forceful gestures such as finger wagging.

Having identified the signs, an examination needs to take place to uncover likely causes. These may be:

• Personal. Different perceptions motives, goals, ambitions, and backgrounds make up the ingredients of many conflict situations and should not be underestimated.

What is the effect of personality? We each bring our own idiosyncrasies and preferences which may clash with others. Some people, for example: Enjoy the cut and thrust of conflict, others detest it. Some people have a strong need to be liked and don't want to upset others.

Others enjoy sticking to defined rules. It is helpful to try to understand where others are coming from and to know personal strengths and weaknesses and how similarities and differences affect individual actions. Potential personality clashes arise from: Extroverts who love interacting with others interacting with introverts who need time to themselves, some people who find it easy to handle people and emotional issues clashing with others who are stressed by such situations. Or, perhaps decisive types who hate uncertainty coming against spontaneous types who resent being tied down and asked for a quick decision. Some need data, others prefer a clean sheet. The possibilities of different personalities clashing through
different work styles is endless! Development of an awareness of such differences can be assisted by workshops to assess the implication of personalities working together and how to make the most of each persons' strengths. However, simply blaming personalities can sometimes be the easy explanation and there may be a whole set of other, underlying reasons which are causing the conflict.

• Group. The way groups are constructed, their size, the quality of the communications channels, the systems and processes which support them may all lead to conflicting interests and potential for territorial and turf wars. In addition, lack of clarity of roles and purpose can lead to groups and individuals stepping on each others toes. Jealousy and anxiety in these circumstances can build up, leading to sparks flying.

New teams are much more likely to be in conflict it is a distinct phase in bedding down. This needs to be understood, not suppressed as it is part of building up norms, processes and identity. A facilitated team workshop can help clarify expectations and get feelings out in the open in a controlled setting.

• Organisational and environmental. Market pressures and rapid change within an industry or sector and the organisation itself may lead to immense pressure on resources, costs and service delivery and be a powerful contributor to organisational and individual stress. Such stress will increase the likelihood of conflict breaking out.

Stage 2 - Plan the Response

Having assessed the situation, a suitable response is requires and this is a second potential problem area. Many managers and staff are ill equipped to handle conflict situations. They are intolerant of ambiguity and have been brought up to expect a single right answer and to apply this in a uniform way, often based on previously learned habits. They may also overly focus on the immediate and short term situation without seeing the wider picture. Their one right way and now approach can result in missing some important nuances and complexities, and implementing solutions which are insufficiently tailored to the work environment and possibly too late. The positive news is that skills and approaches can be taught. To help develop understanding, the authors employ a conflict handling strategy model. This is very useful in understanding what are effective strategies in handling conflict in any given situation. It suggests there are five basic strategies to handle conflict:

Keep the peace
This puts relationships first, even at the expense of getting the job done. The strategy is most useful if the other person's need is more important than yours, the issue at stake is not important to you but the relationship is.

**Do nothing**

This involves leaving the problem alone and is a positive strategy only if the problem is not serious and no contact is required with the other party.

**Force the issue**

This requires you to hold firm to your point of view with the intention that you get your way and the other person has to back down. It is useful if you have the power to win and you are prepared to sacrifice the long term relationship if necessary.

**Split the difference**

This requires both parties to give a bit and take a bit. Whilst the issues and the relationship are addressed with some satisfaction on both sides, they are not fully dealt with and problems may flare up again in the future. It is essentially a pragmatic programme.

**Collaboration**

This is a high involvement, highly goal orientated approach where both people's needs are fully explored and met. It had the advantage of gaining considerable commitment to a more lasting agreement but has the disadvantage that it takes a long time to reach that agreement.

Managers can usefully be taught to recognise their preferred and backup styles and strategies and those which they least use. This process can be very insightful since people frequently stick to one or more styles even in circumstances where conflict would be resolved more readily by an alternative choice of strategy. The next stage is to coach them to practise a wider range of behaviours. This can be done on a development programme through the use of a diagnostic questionnaire and observing how the manager deals with simulated scenarios which replicate situations at work.

**Stage 3 - Implement**

Having identified an appropriate strategy, putting it into practice requires considerable skill. Some suggestions on how to approach conflict situations include:
Constructive Conflict Management

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- Keep your attention on the other person, their needs and interests and put yourself in the other person’s shoes
- Focus on interests and expectations, not fixed position
- Keep an open mind - look for information which supports or modifies your original viewpoint
- Be prepared to take on board different ideas and ways of resolving the situation
- Restate or paraphrase what you’ve heard to demonstrate active listening.
- Treat each person with courtesy and respect
- Admit any mistakes on your part
- Find things you can agree on, rather than focusing solely on disagreements
- Control your emotions, don’t let them control you
- Separate the people from the problem
- Options for mutual gain
- Identify objective criteria to agree success

Your overall stance is to avoid aggression, listen to the other person’s point of view and try and understand it, resolving situations through agreements which both parties can live with.

Nipping Conflict in the Bud

Sometimes quick action is needed to stop conflict and disagreement from mushrooming and the customer suffering. In these circumstances, rapidly:

- Get agreement on rules of engagement
- Clarify the goals and expectations of both parties
- Facilitate a self examination of what has happened so far and its consequences, particularly its effect on the customer
- Allow both sides to let off steam in a controlled environment
- Then press for constructive discussion and action to reach agreement

Skills in reducing conflict

Development programmes can build confidence in handling even the most tricky situations. The skills which reduce harmful conflict are:

- Listening skills, so that you are better able to understand the other persons’ point of view
- Assertiveness, so that you put your views over confidently and clearly without aggression
Constructive Conflict Management

Written by Administrator

• Negotiation skills, so that you are able to reach an agreement which will last
• Meetings handling, so that conflicts in a group setting don't generate more heat than light
• Team working skill, so that people contribute in a more co-operative open manner.

Building interpersonal skills helps deal with conflict rather than suffering in dysfunction. As one manager in a software company put it: 'We still have internal differences, but now we talk about them and try to resolve the issues rather than harbour grudges.'

Stage 4 - Review

Monitoring and reviewing the success of any action to resolve conflict is an important, but frequently neglected stage. Because of the inherent complexity of conflict with which managers are dealing, they need to keep learning vital lessons of conflict resolution. A review needs to satisfactorily answer such questions as

• Has the solution caused damage to the customer relationship?
• How could this be prevented in the future?
• Were the signals identified soon enough?
• Has this revealed some personal blind spots?
• Are there changes needed in organisational structures, roles or processes needed?
• Are there identified training and development needs?
• Is there a need for team development or bridge building with affected groups?
• Have weaknesses been understood and remedied in communication channels?

A personal improvement action checklist

Every customer-centres individual could benefit from considering these action points:

• Treat every relationship, internal and external, as a customer service situation and set out with an open mind and a positive approach to resolve conflict and difference.

• Develop a thorough understanding of conflict: what causes it, what are the early signs, strategies to resolve it, and skills and tactics required to implement the strategy.
• Review how you currently attempt to resolve conflicts: look for patterns, habits and blind spots

• Identify recent successes and failures. List the reasons and what you can learn for the future

• Match conflict handling approaches to what you want to achieve, recognising that there is more than one approach and more than one solution

• Pinpoint a possible conflict situation you may have to deal with, map out a range of options and a plan to implement the most suitable option

• Review successes and failures preferably with a colleague as a sounding board to give you feedback and help you reset personal goals

Organisational action checklist

Organisations can manage the negative effects of conflict through taking a lead in promoting:

• Team building events
• Improved good channels of communication
• Planned change management
• Clear goals and strategies
• Skills development in the competencies of conflict handling
• Regular surveys inside and outside the organisation to pick up signals that all is not well.

Conclusion

Conflict is a reality for all organisations who serve the customer. It can be beneficial if handled well. To ensure that customer service does not suffer through harmful conflict, managers must-

Look ahead and halt destructive conflict quickly diffuse disagreement before it gets out of hand and learn to manage in such a way that differences are confronted skilfully and with confidence.

There is no single device which can ‘cure’ the negative effects of conflict but if you take time to become personally and organisationally robust you will benefit from healthy difference united in the common value of attention to the customer.
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