

Stop, Collaborate and Listen... The Cost of Conflict in the Workplace

Conflict is inevitable; employers are faced with conflict in the workplace every day. Conflict that is not addressed in a timely manner can create a slew of organizational problems such as stress in the workplace, which leads to low productivity and high turnover. Research indicates leaders can shape conflict cultures within their organization and have the ability to influence positive conflict outcomes. Leaders should be cognizant of their own conflict handling style, learn how to create a collaborative organizational culture, and receive conflict management training.

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In today's workplace, organizations need diverse personalities and ideation to be creative and thrive. When individuals with differing viewpoints and opinions work together, conflict will likely occur. Some conflict in organizations is beneficial as it can provide a diverse and productive work environment. However, in order for conflict to be productive, leaders must have the confidence and skills to create a collaborative environment when approaching and resolving conflict. Organizations can empower their leaders through conflict management training to encourage collaborative and effective conflict resolution skills (Oore, Leiter, and LeBlanc, 2015).

Employees are often expected to work cohesively with their coworkers, and although it is unrealistic to expect every employee to be compatible, it is realistic to expect employees to be respectful and amicable. Although conflict for the most part is perceived as negative, some conflict is healthy for an organization as it can encourage individuals to develop capabilities to understand interpersonal differences (Oore, Leiter, and LeBlanc, 2015). Healthy or positive conflict can promote and foster professional and personal growth and bring forth positive change. Conflict becomes negative when there is a strong resistance to change.

Conflict in the workplace is inherent, but identifying it early on and facilitating effective conflict management strategies can help empower employees and establish organizations with a productive conflict culture. A majority of research indicates that leaders hold much power to create and shape organizational culture, but very little research has explored the concept of a leader's impact on conflict cultures (Gefland, Leslie, Keller and de Dreu, 2012). So the question arises, does a leader hold the same power to establish organizational norms regarding how conflict should be handled within an organization? To further investigate the impact of leader-based conflict culture and resolution, Gefland, Leslie, Keller and de Dreu (2012) conducted their own research using data from a large bank in the mid-Atlantic United States.

Do Leaders Set the Tone for Conflict Culture?

To assess a leader's impact on conflict culture, the researchers surveyed 743 employees and their leaders (across 131 branches) within the banking industry by adapting the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling. The survey findings revealed that a leader's collaborative, avoidant, or dominating conflict behavior did in fact establish a conflict culture; the leader's conflict style directly related to the employee's method of conflict handling.

For example, branch leaders who demonstrated avoidant or dominating conflict methods were associated with a low quality of branch creativity and customer service. Leaders who modeled collaborative conflict style created a culture in which employees worked together more cohesively and had lower burnout compared to those with dominating and avoidant leaders, thus showing that collaboration is highly effective and desirable when compared to dominating and avoidant conflict cultures.

Leaders must be aware of their own conflict style and understand the impact it has on their organization's culture. Ignoring the importance of addressing and resolving conflict can increase conflict and create a plethora of costly organizational problems (Dijkstra, Beersma, and Leeuwen, 2014). Leaders should also be properly trained in conflict management since negative conflict is costly.

Nip Conflict it in the Bud

Conflict is costly, especially when it is not handled appropriately or it is left unresolved. Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger, and Spector (2011), found "the annual cost of employee stress, including costs for missed wages due to absenteeism and reduced productivity and health care costs, have been estimated to be \$200-350 billion in the United States" (p.1). When conflict is not resolved it could expand quickly and this can be very costly for an organization, both economically and in relation to an employee's health (Sonnentag, Unger and Nägel, 2013). Conflict can create office gossip, which can take time away from doing actual work and can create a toxic work environment (Dijkstra, Beersma, and Leeuwen, 2014).

Set Leaders Up for Success

Since research has found a direct link between leadership and the culture of conflict resolution, one suggestion to successfully handle workplace conflict is to assess the effectiveness of the leader's conflict handling style. Organizations can benefit greatly by ensuring their leaders are equipped with appropriate education to understand their conflict style (Gefland, Leslie, Keller and de Dreu, 2012). Another suggestion is for organizations to invest in conflict management training that promotes collaboration. Investing in leaders is critical to organizational culture and can have positive effects on the organizational conflict handling capabilities (Sinha, 2011). Leaders would benefit from being educated on creating collaborative conflict cultures in order to bolster employee motivation, increase engagement and productivity, and decrease employee burnout.

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