

THIRD PARTY CONFLICT RESOLUTION

By Michael H. Smith, Ph.D.

Conflict is a natural part of human affairs. We often try to avoid it, but when we embrace and work through conflicts, this can lead to new levels of creativity in the workplace.

The problem is that most people do not have very good conflict resolution skills. They tend to get defensive and too personal and they don't believe in the possibility of win/win solutions.

So when two people have a conflict in the workplace, it is often necessary to meet with a neutral third party who can facilitate a mutually agreeable solution. In this article, I will teach you the basics of how to do third party facilitation.

It is a very useful skill to have because resolving conflicts successfully strengthens teamwork and morale. It also tends to raise productivity and reduce absenteeism and turnover.

Before I begin, I would recommend that you do some reading to gain some basic concepts and skills. I would recommend Getting to Yes, the classic negotiating book by Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, and Forgive for Good by Fred Luskin. These are very useful books in this area.

Prior to the Meeting

Once you've done your homework, you should meet with each of the individuals separately. The purpose of these meetings is to determine how willing each of them is to get together to resolve things.

I would emphasize that it's best to start with relatively simple problems. Don't deal with major issues like sexual harassment or serious diversity conflicts when you're just beginning.

When you begin, ask each person whether they trust you to act as a facilitator. But if they don't feel comfortable with you, you'll need to find someone else.

Telling Their Story

Then ask each one to tell you their story. Luskin's book is particularly useful in terms of describing how people get stuck with their grievance stories. You might also ask me for my articles on "Forgiveness" because forgiveness can make a big difference at this stage.

Simply allowing them to tell their story will help diffuse some of their anger. Empathize with the person's pain without justifying their position; e.g., "I see you feel hurt by what happened." Doing so will help them trust you more.

Finding Out What They Really Want

When they are calmer, help them clarify their real needs and goals. Often what a person says they want does not meet their underlying needs. They may be saying what they think they should say rather than what they

really want or can live with. Draw them out by asking a lot of open-ended questions such as “What do you really want?” or “How could we really resolve this?” Finding the real needs now will make the joint meeting go much easier.

If you come to the conclusion that one (or both) of the individuals is simply too angry to resolve things, then don't schedule a facilitation meeting. It will only make things worse. If they are willing to get together, then schedule a session within a week of the initial meeting.

During the Meeting

Setting Ground Rules

The first thing you will need to do at the meeting is to set out the ground rules:

- Assure each person that they will have a full opportunity to speak.
- Let them know that everything that's said will be completely confidential.
- Tell them that personal attacks (e.g., name calling) will not be tolerated.
- Emphasize that each is here by choice and that any agreements must be freely entered into.

Reassure them that you are neutral and have no stake in the outcome. Make sure they both understand the rules. Get both of them to agree to them.

Clarifying Issues And Remaining Calm

Once you've done that, then you can ask each person to tell their story. Give them five minutes each with more time if necessary.

Say that they shouldn't use "you" statements to blame the other person (e.g., "You made me angry."). Instead they should use "I" statements (e.g., "This is what happened to me and this is how I feel about it.").

If one person is still too angry to willingly resolve things at the moment, you will be able to see this during their story. Caution that person to calm down. Remain calm yourself so that you're a good role model.

If they continue to be upset, you might need to take them aside to talk. Let them know that you will stop the meeting if they can't let go of their anger and blame.

Once each person has told their side of the story, ask each one to paraphrase what they heard the other person say. This should take 2-5 minutes per person.

Allow them to ask for any clarification they might need. Suggest they say, "I want to understand what you meant when you said . . ."

Do not allow either person to accuse the other one of lying. Emphasize that each person is describing things from their own point of view and telling "their truth" as they see it.

Problem Solving

Once they've heard each other, then you can move on to the next stage of the process, which is defining the problem (e.g., "Let's see if you can both agree on what the problem really is.>").

Allow each person to describe what they understand the problem to be. It would be useful to write their definitions on a flip chart and then ask them to look for common denominators (e.g., "We seem to disagree on the goal of this project.>"). Agreeing on the problem is a major step toward coming up with a mutually agreeable solution.

During the next stage, ask each person for two or three creative solutions to the problem. Write them down.

Remember, when you explore these solutions with them, you are not looking for the "best" solution or the one you like most or the one you think they should like. You're looking for the solution they can agree to.

Make sure that their real needs are part of the solution. Since you heard what they really want as part of your private conversations with each of them, you might prompt them if they need help in speaking more freely about these needs.

Ask each person if the solution they prefer meets the other person's needs as well as their own. Getting them to think in this manner will create a sense of cooperation.

Most people are able to come up with a satisfactory solution. But if they can't, then don't force it. Take some time off so they can mull things over and then meet again.

Once they've come up with a workable solution, take some time to find out what might get in the way of their following through on their agreements. Ask them: "What will you have to watch out for? What might mess things up?" Have them come up with a few creative ways to resolve these things.

Write down a rough draft of the solution including the potential weak spots and solutions for those issues. Ask each person to initial the agreement.

After the Meeting

Follow-up

In a few weeks, get together to see how things worked out. Ask them: "What worked? What didn't work?" Work with them to come up with new solutions if they got stuck.

Check back in two to four weeks. Keep meeting until they successfully complete their agreement.

Conflict is inevitable, but it can be the springboard for mutual understanding and action. By learning how to be a third party facilitator, you will be able to help your people make the most of the conflicts that arise. You will also be teaching them how to resolve disputes, get along better with each other, and be more productive.

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