Resolving Conflict in the Workplace
PARTNERing for Success

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Resolving Conflict in the Workplace: PARTNERing for Success

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“You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.” Indira Gandhi

Abstract

Conflict in the workplace can take a number of different forms and degrees – from muted disagreement through to raised voices, sometimes even violence. It can occur between team members, between managers of different departments or between managers and staff. It can damage personal and business relationships, can result from personal interaction or organizational culture and it can arise spontaneously or build over time. Whatever its form or vehemence, conflict can have serious consequences for individuals and organisations alike and it can be costly: This paper illustrates a fresh approach being used in real organisational practice. The paper suggests a more effective partnership approach which develops line managers to have the skills to recognise conflicts and have the confidence to deal with them at an early stage, resolving through effective communication and dialogue. The ‘PARTNER’ approach provides managers, team leaders, supervisors and HR professionals with a solution-focused framework for that dialogue which allows them to deal with workplace conflicts in a way that is both effective and sustainable. It recognizes that every conflict is different, relies on communication and dialogue rather than formal process and procedure, focuses on both resolving the immediate conflict and strengthening the overall relationship and on planning the future, not judging the past. Using a case study approach, situational examples are presented that illustrate the use of the approach in practice, specifically showing that by focusing on resolution (not blame), the future (not the past) and on what’s going well (rather than what’s gone wrong) to ensure a positive and pragmatic way of making progress. The paper concludes by highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the PARTNER approach, how the approach is developing and how it is achieving solutions.

Introduction

It is easy to think of conflict as a destructive force. Conflict is almost universally perceived as a negative occurrence, a blemish on what most people expect should be the smooth operation of a well-ordered life. That may be partly because we are
biologically ill-prepared to resolve conflicts. We tend to react in two ways to the stress of being in conflict: “fight” (coercion, power plays) and “flight” (distancing, walking away). The truth is, however, that conflict is neither positive nor negative in and of itself. Conflict is the interaction between two parties who have different thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and so forth, and they perceive that the differences create a situation that will be contrary to their interests or needs. However, the outcomes of conflict can be hugely positive. For example, making good-quality decisions means being open to alternative ways of thinking from a diverse group of people and considering a range of options.

Underpinning most definitions of conflict is the concept of “differences”. However, differences alone do not create conflict. It is the expression of those differences in the way people behave with each other that results in conflict. A useful definition is provided by Dana (2001) who describes Workplace Conflict as:

“A condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem.”

However, regardless of definition, the real key is that conflict causes a business problem – people’s productivity and job performance is affected by their lack of co-operation. The fact that they may not like each other, by itself, is not the business problem. The problem that matters to the business is the impact on job performance caused by the behaviours that each one uses as they interact.

Conflict is also expensive to businesses in terms of wasted time, bad decisions, lost employees, lowered job motivation, health costs and legal expenses. The OPP (2008) suggest that for the UK this might be in the region of 370 million working days, or more than £24 billion, lost every year as a result of conflict in the workplace. Further, CIPD (2007) report that on average organisations devote more than 12 days in HR and management time a year in managing disciplinary and grievance cases for every 100 employees. The survey also found that employers face average annual costs associated with employment tribunal claims and hearings of £20,000.

The burden and significance of tribunals cannot be overstated. In 2006-2007 the number of individual employment disputes that resulted in employment tribunal applications increased to 132,577 compared with 115,039 for the previous year. This partly reflects a greater public awareness of employment rights and their recourse to litigation, but the situation was exacerbated by the introduction in October 2004 of the Statutory Dispute Resolution Regulations, which demanded that every business follows a three-step disciplinary and grievance procedure. In practice this led to a formalisation of how conflict at work is managed, resulting in more time being spent following disciplinary and grievance procedures and no reduction in the number of employment tribunal applications made by disgruntled employees.

On 6 April 2009 the statutory dispute resolution procedures (SDRPs) were repealed in Great Britain and a new ACAS code of practice on disciplinary and grievance
procedures (the new code) came into force. While employers can breathe a sigh of relief, they still have to stick to a set of principles in a new 10-page ACAS Code of Practice – backed up by a 70-page guidance document on handling disciplinary procedures and grievances or face the possibility of a 25% increase in any award that the tribunal makes against them.

Relying on disciplinary and grievance procedures is counter-productive

Inevitably, organisations are increasingly relying on their HR departments to manage conflict as managers shy away from tackling disputes in case they do or say something that might be held against them during any formal proceedings. This approach is counterproductive, as by the time a dispute has escalated to the point where the disciplinary procedure has been triggered or a formal grievance lodged, opinions are often hardened and confrontational stances on both sides have developed that are very hard to change. In other words, organisations are spending many thousands of pounds to deliver outcomes that are not consistent with individuals staying in their jobs and working collaboratively and effectively with their colleagues.

We believe a much more effective approach is for line managers and HR to have the skills to recognise conflicts and have the confidence to deal with them at an early stage. Intervention that is positive, proactive and preventative is far more effective and it is this that forms the basis of our approach. The PARTNER model provides line managers and HR professionals with a framework to help them have those difficult conversations and to facilitate discussions between the two parties.

Surprisingly, it appears a less common approach to train managers and employees to resolve conflict on a less formal basis. However, the research by OPP (2008) shows that where training does exist, it clearly adds value: of those employees receiving training, 27% say it made them more comfortable and confident in managing disputes and 58% say they now look for win-win outcomes from conflict.

What’s distinctive about Solutions-Focussed Conflict Resolution?

The shift from problem focus to solution focus was driven by Steve De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg who founded the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, USA (see for example, de Shazer 1988, de Shazer et al., 2007). From these therapeutic origins over twenty years ago, the approach has now been developed and applied in many settings including organisations. It is now being used by major corporations, top business schools and many coaches and consultants as a methodology for managing change at individual, departmental and organisational levels.

The Centre for Solutions Focus at Work (sfwork) leads the development and application of Solutions Focus (SF) approaches in the workplace. The PARTNER model has been
developed in association with sfwork to provide a simple and practical approach to resolving conflict in the workplace. PARTNER is an acronym standing for Platform definition; Approach other party; Rules of communication; Their story-your story; Notice past success; Express appreciation; Reach agreement. The concepts within this framework are explained in the next section.

Traditional approaches to conflict resolution focus heavily on the need to analyse and understand the triggers and causes of the conflict in order to resolve it. Hence the emphasis is on what has happened in the past and present and all the “problems” that need to be fixed as a result. In other words, conversations revolve around what individuals do not want i.e. the conflict, why people did what they did (motivations) and how they made the other party feel (emotions).

In The Solutions Focus (Jackson & McKergow, 2007) the authors describe the Solutions Focus approach in terms of three simple, elegant and radical ideas which also underpin the PARTNER model:

- “Be as clear as possible about what’s wanted – this is the “solution” on which we focus”. A fundamental assumption that underpins solutions-focussed work is that there is not necessarily a logical connection between the problem and the solution and detailed understanding of the “problem” is usually little help in arriving at a solution. In the context of conflict this leads us to recognize that the cause of the conflict i.e. the differences between two parties is not necessarily the issue that needs to be resolved. The issue that needs to be resolved is that each one’s productivity and job performance is affected by their lack of co-operation and this may also be impacting on others. Hence, resolving the conflict does not necessarily mean resolving the differences that caused the conflict. Instead it is about getting people to work co-operatively and productively to address the business problem that results from the conflict. This means that the emphasis is on what is wanted instead of the conflict and how each party wants things to be different in the future described in specific, observable, behavioural terms.

- “Harness what is already in place and use these positive forces to influence the emerging future in the direction of the solution”. Solutions Focus recognizes that no problem exists to the same degree all the time – there will almost always be times when things are better or have been better occasionally before. The same is true of relationships and even in conflict there will be evidence of collaboration and things that are working about the relationship. The PARTNER approach focuses on both the immediate conflict and the overall relationship, of which a particular conflict is but one part. It recognizes that conflict is not absolute and there are other aspects of the relationship that we can build on positively.

- “Take a direct route to what works by overlooking pitfalls and excursions, such as delving into problems and what’s not working.” Many people view a particular conflict as defining their entire relationship with another party. In other words, they allow one conflict to become so dominant that the overall long-term relationship is
ignored. Rather than delving into the conflict and allowing it to define the relationship, a far more effective perception is that it is but one part of a complex and useful relationship. The conflict can be viewed as one that punctuates the long-term relationship, bringing to the surface something that needs to be addressed, rather than destroys it. If dealt with effectively, it can even help improve the relationship.

The important differences between a problem-focused approach to conflict resolution and a solution-focused approach are summarised below:

**Problem Focus**
- Past/present oriented
- Conversations about what the individuals do not want i.e. the conflict
- Focus on the conflict, exploring and analysing causes of the conflict
- Big changes are needed
- Success is defined as resolving the conflict

**Solutions Focus**
- Future oriented
- Conversations about what the individuals want instead of the conflict (i.e. preferred future)
- Focus on when the relationship has been better; exploring and analysing exceptions to the conflict
- Small changes are often sufficient
- Success is defined as the preferred future

**The PARTNER model in practice**

As mentioned previously, PARTNER is an acronym standing for *Platform definition; Approach other party; Rules of communication; Their story-your story; Notice past success; Express appreciation; Reach agreement.*

**Before the Discussion (PAR)**

Conflicts live and die on the words people choose and the way people deliver them. Those who resolve conflicts effectively make sure their thoughts are in order before they open their mouths to make an attempt at resolution. In line with this, *Platform Definition; Approach Other Party; Rules of Communication (PAR)* are elements of the model that each party in the conflict should think about before entering into discussion with the other party(s).

*Platform Definition* is a fundamental element for helping each party frame the situation constructively. It refers to a process of defining the business problem that needs to be solved and how each party would like things to be different as well as considering the
consequences and whether there are any real benefits. The process also encourages each party to reflect on what is working in the relationship and what gives them grounds for optimism that the relationship can improve. This helps each party decide how much effort they’re prepared to make and, if they decide to act, gives them greater confidence to Approach Other Party and consider the Rules of Communication i.e. setting up the meeting in such a way as to create an atmosphere of partnership and collaboration.

During the Discussion (TNE)

If people follow the PAR steps described above, they will create the best possible atmosphere in which two parties can meet. Once the parties come together, an atmosphere of partnership needs to be created and maintained. Their Story-Your Story; Notice Past Success; Express Appreciation (TNE) help people feel heard, feel respected and feel validated while engaging them in the process of solving the business problem. This in turn leads to their feeling ownership of and commitment to a solution that they have had a voice in creating.

Their Story-Your Story encourages each party to hear the others’ story and listen for who and what is important to them before moving on to discuss how they would like things to be instead in order to establish a shared preferred future.

In situations of conflict, people often tend to focus on the negative aspects. Whatever the other party did to contribute to the conflict tends to get the most attention and because a particular negative event in the past contributed to the conflict they are now facing, they sometimes let that negative event colour the entire past. There is a strong temptation to forget that those people also have positive qualities and potential and that there have also been positive past events.

Notice Past Success reminds both parties of these positive past events and shows that there is some solid relationship ground on which to build a resolution to the current conflict. Express Appreciation encourages each party to look for and affirm the other party’s positive qualities and use that positive foundation as a base on which to build an effective way of dealing with the conflict. If the other party can see how their positive behaviour enhances the relationship there is a better chance that any destructive negative behaviour will lessen

Reach Agreement (R)

The previous steps move us toward the crucial task of agreeing the specific steps each party is willing and able to take to improve their relationship. Here it is important to remember that every journey begins with a single step. Instant resolution is rarely possible. The parties in conflict may not have enough trust in each other to take giant leaps. If they focus instead on smaller steps, they may be able to prove to themselves and to each other that they can indeed work together. Furthermore, working on and accomplishing some small steps can sometimes help the parties see more clearly where they need to go and help them feel more energised and confident about moving on to the more difficult aspects of the conflict.
The PARTNER model is a framework for use by managers and HR professionals within an organisation as well as external mediators, consultants and coaches. It can be applied to a number of different situations:

- “Self-help” i.e. use by an individual to help them prepare and resolve a conflict between themselves and another;
- Coaching of one or both individuals in a conflict to help them prepare and resolve it between themselves;
- Mediation of conflicts between two individuals;
- Facilitation of conflict resolution within or between teams.

References


ACAS (2009). Discipline and Grievance at Work: the ACAS Guide. www.acas.co.uk


