

COPING WITH CONFLICT

A wise person once said, "Any time two or more people get together, conflict is inevitable". Truer words have never been spoken. Few people actually enjoy conflict, but as hard as we may try to avoid it, all of us become involved in conflict from time to time. Whether we are directly involved, or simply a bystander mediating conflict between others, conflict is inescapable. While it is true that all conflict involves some degree of tension, uncertainty, and unpleasantness, those conflicts that end badly tend to be more memorable than those that end well. Yes, sometimes conflict can actually be productive, resulting in at least some degree of satisfaction for all parties involved. In coping with conflict more effectively, we must direct our efforts toward moving away from destructive conflicts. Such conflicts have defeat of the opponent as their goal and are marked by coercion and inflexibility – a win/lose approach. Viewing conflict in the context of a search for resolution is key to more effective, productive conflict resolution.

Conflict situations are rife with misunderstandings, one of which is our human tendency to project negative attitudes and approaches on others, while often overlooking or rationalizing our own similar behaviors. In other words, we tend to apply a double standard when we're involved in conflict. For example: It's OK for me to say (or do) that, but not for you! Additionally, people in conflict usually assume everyone sees situations as they do. By not recognizing that others' different interests, needs, values, and experiences affect their perceptions, we cannot accept that any view other than our own could be correct. The effects of these misunderstandings are often magnified because as tension mounts between two parties involved in conflict, communications between them usually break down. When we stop communicating directly, we act based on assumptions, stereotypes, and rumors, which are generally inaccurate. As is the case with most interpersonal problems, communication is key to effective conflict resolution. So often, conflicts seem insurmountable as we silently brood over them, but once the issues involved are placed "on the table" for discussion, solutions can often be developed rather quickly.

Not every conflict situation should involve confrontation. The importance of "picking your battles" certainly applies in conflict resolution. Sometimes, the damage to the situation or the relationship that would result from confrontation is greater than the potential payoff. In other cases, the lack of resources - generally time - prevents conflict situations from being confronted. On the other hand, sometimes conflict suppression sets the stage for a future explosion. For example, most employee performance problems do not correct themselves without supervisor intervention. What's worse, a supervisor who routinely avoids

confronting employees about problem behaviors loses the respect of others in the work group, who legitimately look to the supervisor to correct the problem. If this avoiding behavior persists, the standards for the work group overall will decline, as employees learn that substandard performance is accepted. Broadening one's repertoire of responses to conflict and learning which responses best fit which situations are important keys to resolving conflicts more effectively.

My next column will focus on additional obstacles to conflict resolution and a practical, step by step, approach for effectively resolving workplace conflicts.