

Managing and Resolving Conflict

HUMAN RESOURCES INFORMATION SERIES FOR SUPERVISORS

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I. Overview

Conflict is an inevitable result of social interaction. Conflict exists in organizations because, by their very nature, organizations require social interaction between people with different goals, values, and backgrounds. Recent structural, economic, and philosophical changes in the world of work have escalated the likelihood and level of conflict within workplace organizations.

Distinctions must be made, though, between positive and negative aspects of conflict in the workplace. If constructively managed, conflict may lead to clearer ideas and increased organizational effectiveness. If unchecked, however, conflict may become unduly disruptive. This guide is designed to provide information necessary to help supervisors effectively manage and resolve conflicts. This guide also provides an overview of the formal grievance procedure.

II. Supervisor and Employee Rights

Supervisor: has a right to effectively manage a work unit or program. The supervisor also has a right to require employees to use available processes and procedures to express concerns and complaints.

Employees: have a right to express concerns and complaints using available processes and procedures. If concerns and disputes cannot be resolved informally, employees have the right to file a formal complaint, free of any act or threat of retaliation.

III. Factors Leading to Conflict

Effective conflict management exists when the source of conflict is understood. Following are some common factors that contribute to workplace conflict.

! **Organizational Factors**

Organizational change:

Employees unsure about their role in an evolving organization may experience stress which, in turn, may produce conflict.

Diverse employee groups:

Several studies have documented that conflict is greater in organizations whose members differ in terms of gender, ethnicity, and economic status.

Strategic/operational disagreement:

Conflict may occur when there is disagreement regarding an organization's mission or direction, or the objectives and strategies employed to accomplish that mission. Conflict may also arise when there is disagreement about the most appropriate processes for accomplishing work.

Competition between units/groups:

Conflict may arise when different parts of an organization compete against each other for resources, status, etc.

Unreasonable workloads/standards:

If the people in an organization are expected to do more than is reasonably possible, frustrations can build and conflict can increase.

! **Interpersonal Factors**

Lack of common understanding:

Conflict may occur when two or more individuals differ in their perception of an issue or situation.

Goal conflict:

When employees and/or supervisors desire different outcomes, conflict is a natural result.

Poor communication skills:

Conflict is common when one person doesn't feel listened to or understood by another.

Unclear/unfair expectations:

Conflict may arise if supervisors or employees do not clearly communicate what they need from others or if what they need from others is unreasonable.

Power-plays and manipulation:

If a person bullies others with position authority or situational power, or if a person tries to manipulate others to get something desired, conflict is likely.

IV. Conflict Management Strategies

The following are strategies to prevent or reduce disruptive workplace conflict:

! **Organizational Strategies**

Reduce role ambiguity:

Role ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity about an employee's assignments, how those assignments relate to the assignments of others, or how all employee assignments relate to the goals of the organization.

Provide support for assignment completion:

As assignments grow more complex and less routine, the potential for conflict increases because employees are less certain about how to approach new assignments. Supervisors should provide clear expectations on what successful performance looks like as well as make it possible for employees to discuss the processes and tools necessary for successful assignment completion.

Eliminate work overloads and underloads:

Work flows should be coordinated to ensure that employees are challenged without being overwhelmed. Employees who are not challenged can get bored and invest their energy in unproductive activities, while employees who are overwhelmed can get frustrated. Both conditions can cause disruptive conflict.

Improve access to information:

Poor communication is a major cause of conflict. When employees are hungry for information and that information is not provided, they will often create it. The resultant rumors are likely to lead to the creation or escalation of organized conflict.

Involve employees in organizational change and decisions:

People tend to change when they have participated in decisions leading to change. People tend to resist change to the extent they feel change is imposed on them.

! **Interpersonal Strategies**

Try to understand different work styles and perspectives of others:

Because people come into the workplace with different backgrounds and personalities, effective conflict management requires employees and supervisors to be aware of how the people they work with tend to react in certain situations. There are numerous inventories (e.g. Myers-Briggs) and other tools that may help coworkers understand and appreciate the work styles of others.

Develop interpersonal skills related to conflict management:

Assertiveness, communication, and negotiation skills training may provide employees and supervisors the techniques and confidence they need to resolve conflict quickly, effectively and independently.

Develop skills for conflict management in groups:

Making decisions, solving problems, and evaluating performance requires different skills and processes in a group or team setting.

Eliminate win-lose situations:

Whenever an employee or supervisor approaches a problem or conflict by defining success

as getting something at the expense of another person, a disruptive workplace conflict is a likely result. A more effective approach to negotiation and conflict management than this competitive, adversarial, win-lose approach is a collaborative, mutually beneficial, win-win approach.

Use informal conflict resolution processes when possible:

Because miscommunication is at the root of many conflicts and people tend to become more defensive and adversarial in formal complaint processes, using informal approaches to conflict resolution can be very effective in preventing disruptive workplace conflicts. These informal options are discussed in more detail below.

V. Options for Conflict Resolution

Numerous options are available to University employees for resolving conflicts or disputes. No one option, however, is best or right for all employees in all situations. A number of factors can affect which option is most desirable.

Goals - What does each party want or need? What will it take to satisfy each person involved?

Approach to conflict - Does each party view conflict as (win-lose) competition or as (win-win) collaborative problem solving?

Decision control - Do the parties want to retain control over conflict resolution decisions, or do they want to let someone else decide and live with the results?

Timing - How quickly does each party need to resolve the situation? Some processes take longer than others.

Health/personal problems - Will any medical or personal factors limit either party's energy or ability to address conflict issue?

Type of issue - Are there specific offices designated to handle specific issues? For example, the University's Equity and Diversity Office handles illegal discrimination complaints.

Most situations allow for a negotiated approach, which is typically desirable because it allows all the parties involved to seek a mutually beneficial resolution. If any party feels the conflict resolution process makes him or her a "loser," it can cause resentment and negative consequences in the long-run, if not in the short-run.

Following are specific conflict resolution options that are available to University employees.

Self-Negotiated Resolution:

Most conflicts can be resolved by the parties themselves on an informal basis. The parties engage in problem-solving dialogue about their differences and possible solutions. The more respect the parties show each other in the process and the more they work together to identify solutions that work for everyone, the better the chances of successful resolution.

Internal Facilitation:

Sometimes people involved in a conflict get stuck and need a third party to help with the problem-solving process or to communicate in a more effective manner. Often supervisors or team leaders can effectively serve as facilitators for resolving conflict between employees, and managers can effectively facilitate conflict resolution between employees and supervisors/team leaders.

Outside Facilitation:

Some conflicts are more complex or intense, and so inviting in a third-party facilitator from outside the department is a desirable option. Human Resources staff, and/or the Equity and Diversity Officer (for conflicts involving illegal discrimination/harassment) can serve a role in helping the parties to negotiate and solve problems.

VI. Grievance Procedure

Some conflicts cannot be resolved through the informal options described above. For any number of reasons, one or more of the parties feels that going through a formal complaint process is the only option available to meet his or her goals. Depending on the issue involved, there is a complaint process available to employees here at the University.

Full time employees have the right to appeal in the case of a supervisory decision which has a perceived adverse effect upon the employee.

The procedure is as follows:

- A. The employee must discuss the matter with the department head or supervisor in an effort to reach a solution.
- B. If step A proves unsatisfactory the matter should be taken to the chief administrator of the division in an attempt at reaching a solution. This should be done within five work days.
- C. If step B proves unsatisfactory or infeasible the matter should be taken to Human Resources within a total of seven work days from the time of the discussion in (A).
- D. If no resolution is reached in step C, then a written appeal may be made to the President. A decision by the President, or his designated representative, within ten days of the receipt will be final.

Allegations of discrimination concerning AA/EEO/HC or Title IX matters should follow organizational channels and should be referred to the Equity and Diversity Officer or his/her representative.