Using Coaching and Assessments to Manage Conflict and Create Productive Team Performance
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Conflict in the Workplace: A Drain on Productivity and Organizational Performance

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, and the workplace is no exception. It is so prevalent, in fact, that April has been designated Workplace Conflict Awareness Month. According to a new research report by organizational development firm CPP, U.S. employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict, equating to approximately $359 billion in paid hours in 2008.\(^1\) And a study by the University of Florida concludes that workplace conflict “affects the productivity of both managers and associates and can have a far-reaching impact on organizational performance.”\(^2\) Because workplace conflict can be such a drain on workplace productivity and morale, organizations must find ways to effectively deal with conflict.

What’s the Cause?

In his article, Six Ways to Resolve Workplace Conflicts, Art Bell\(^3\) offers the following reasons for conflict in the workplace: Conflicting needs, conflicting goals, conflicting pressures and conflicting roles. And Brett Hart, PhD, in “Conflict in the Workplace” suggests two more causes: different personal values and unpredictable policies.\(^4\) While reasons like these are often cited as causes for workplace conflict, the root cause of team conflict is the inherent differences in how people are wired—their core personalities. Conflict occurs when people find themselves at odds but are not equipped to get to the bottom of the conflict. The initial conflict between two people can also cause difficulties among the people who report to them; how do you follow people who can’t get along? Team trust and enthusiasm can be broken, and the end result is reduced morale and performance.

Case Study: Below, and throughout this paper, A.J. O’Connor Associates presents excerpts of a real-life conflict situation they were brought in to address, to illustrate the conflict management coaching process.

Two vice presidents support the same function on a leadership team for their company. Mark is described as conflict averse and feels that Bob is too critical. Bob is described as transparent and openly dismissive of the value of “soft” skills. There have been contentious exchanges between the two, with no regard for how the other felt.

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\(^3\) Bell, Art. (2002). Six ways to resolve workplace conflicts. McLaren School of Business, University of San Francisco.
Effects of Workplace Conflict

Just as in any setting, conflict has a negative effect on productivity and morale. Conflict in the workplace can have far-reaching and costly consequences. High turnover, absenteeism, project failure and even physical violence can result from a tense work environment. The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine reports approximately 50% higher incidents of absenteeism in work environments that are perceived as highly stressful due to conflict. The Consulting Psychology Press (CPP) report found that roughly one in three U.S. workers say that conflict has led to personal injury or attacks, while one in five report that it has led to illness or absence from work. Stress can also harm the bottom line. Stress-related illnesses can inflate health care costs as employees seek treatment for unresolved work issues, as well as legal fees from disgruntled employees who have legitimate grievances or are trying to “get even” with a company that refused to effectively manage conflict.

Mark doesn’t trust Bob and feels Bob has broken their trust in the past. He feels that Bob doesn’t really listen to what’s being said, and therefore doesn’t value the input provided as relevant. This is demonstrated by Bob responding in a defensive, condescending manner that is interpreted as “it’s done—I’ve already made up my mind.” Mark in turn feels “dismissed” and “terrible” about himself, which in turn causes him to back down. Bob is aware of the frustration in his voice; he gets louder and finds himself saying things without considering the impact of his words.

Who is Responsible for Managing Conflict?

If conflicts were easy to resolve, the phrase “conflict management” would not exist. But conflicts are often hard to sort out—so who is going to manage them? Whose responsibility is it? By the time a corporate officer learns of a conflict, it’s because the executives involved have not been able to resolve their differences and the conflict has escalated. The officer will often pass the conflict management buck back to the executives mistakenly assuming that since the two involved are intelligent adults they should be able to “figure it out” themselves. But at this point, it should be clear that the two do not have the necessary skill set to overcome the conflict. Alternately, the officer may identify more with one of the executives involved and fuel the conflict further with partiality.

Tammy Lenski, Ed.D, writes in her article, “Conflict at Work”, that employees demonstrate through word and action the unofficial policy of “how we deal with conflict here,” which can have a significant impact on whether conflict unfolds in a healthy or destructive way. “Poor conflict engagement skills in an organization’s leaders often mean poorly managed conflict throughout the system.” For the sake of the teams involved, it is the responsibility of the executives and their boss to find ways to manage conflict.
Bob and Mark have tried but don’t do an effective job of resolving their differences. Mark shuts down by taking Bob’s attitude personally, and his own tendency is to avoid confrontation. Bob realizes that his frustration with Mark “triggers” his behavior of showing impatience, yet he is having difficulty changing. The company wants to keep up morale and not have Bob and Mark’s conflict get in the way of their priorities. The company wants them to communicate the same messages and not allow their difficulty to spill over into their respective teams.

Bob and Mark are ideal candidates for coaching because they are both high achievers who fill vital roles in the company, and are therefore difficult to replace. It behooves their employer to provide resources to address their conflict. Additionally, both individuals are willing to work on the problem. Coaching won’t work for people who are not willing to work through a difficult situation. Bob and Mark’s boss suggested bringing in an external executive coach to help the two work through their challenges. Committed to finding a better way to manage conflicts, Bob and Mark welcomed this approach.

The Role of the Coach

There are many benefits in bringing a coach into a conflict situation. An external executive coach:

- Has expertise in human behavior
- Is an objective observer from outside the organization
- Can pinpoint the root issues underlying conflict
- Creates an individualized action plan for managing conflict
- Follows up to support sustainability

Coaching is not about trying to change people’s inherent personalities or make everyone “nice.” When an executive coach comes into a conflict situation, the goal is to diagnose the root cause of the problem and provide those involved with insight and with skills to more effectively manage conflict.

To accomplish these goals, a coaching engagement will typically consist of three core elements: (1) An interview with the client and organization to better understand the background of the conflict and why coaching is needed; (2) Assessments to give the coach and the client the information needed to provide a deeper understanding of the issues; (3) A development plan for the client(s) to successfully manage the conflict and put their new skills into practice.

The Role of Assessments in Managing Conflict

The goal of an executive coach is to get to the root of the conflict. Assessments can give the coach information on each person’s manner of managing and resolving conflict. The coach then uses the assessment results to understand how each person’s personality may work with or against the other person.
Coaches have many assessment options at their disposal, depending on what they want to assess: competency, intelligence, motivation, behavior, etc. Where conflict coaching is required, The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) are popular choices because, as noted earlier, personality differences lie at the root of conflict.

The TKI gives people a heightened awareness of their conflict management styles and how those styles affect interpersonal and group interactions. It describes five conflict-handling “modes” and offers strategies for when to use each of them.

The MBTI is a personality assessment designed to measure preferences in how people perceive and make decisions. The MBTI categorizes these preferences into four categories or “dichotomies”: Thinking or Feeling, Sensing or Intuiting, Introverting or Extraverting, and Judging or Perceiving. This yields 16 possible personality types (INFJ, etc.—see sidebar), the description of which can help people better understand themselves and those around them.

After the initial meetings with Mark and Bob, the coach determined that using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) would be appropriate in this particular case. This data provides insight about:

- Each person’s preferences for how they gather information, make decisions, handle conflict, communicate, etc.
- The impact of each person’s style on the other person when they interact
- Similarities and differences between both people

The TKI revealed:

- Bob’s preferred conflict-handling style is Avoiding
- Mark’s preferred conflict-handling style is Collaborating

The MBTI revealed:

- Bob – ISTJ: Tends to think before he speaks. He has already arrived at the solution he desires and can dig in his heels to get what he thinks is rights. He also relates well to data and details.

Type theory expresses the view that each of the 16 personality types has a unique set of strengths or resources that are derived from the specific way in which the particular type processes information and makes decisions. The second assumption is knowledge of individual differences in personality type can help reduce conflict by redirecting potential sources of misunderstanding. Through knowledge and understanding of type preferences when conflict does occur, blaming and other negative elements of conflict can be managed.

— Paladin Associates
• **Mark – ENFJ:** Talks things out; he is a “big picture” person and is more focused on the personal values and the people involved in the situation. He takes a longer time to arrive at decisions.

• **Boss – ESTJ:** Similar to Bob, but extraverted, so people know what she’s thinking. She is a results-oriented driver.

The coach goes over each party’s assessment results individually. Each person gains self-awareness. The coach then brings both parties together and revisits, step by step, an actual conflict they have had. Each becomes more aware of how their own behavior affects the other person, and why the other person reacts as they do. The next step is to develop strategies to successfully interact with that person in the future. The coach helps each person create and write down these strategies, and then put them into practice. The two parties meet periodically with their coach to measure progress.

The coach met with Bob and Mark individually, then together. Each had an “aha” moment as they discovered how their behavior affected the other person. The coach discussed tactics for managing their specific areas of conflict and instructed them to keep a journal. Through journaling, Bob was able to identify specific times when Mark’s behaviors triggered his own reactions of annoyance. The coach also realized that Bob and Mark’s boss was contributing to the problem by tending to identify with Bob, whose personality is very similar to hers. The boss became aware of the problem and used the coach’s suggestions to change that dynamic.

Bob now feels comfortable having conversations with Mark. He sees a big decrease in tension and feels Mark is more of a friend than just a co-worker. Mark also reports that there is no more underlying tension. He says Bob is very approachable and that he’s not apprehensive about approaching Bob now. Both feel significant progress has been made. They are trying to form an alliance when they approach their boss and be more supportive of each other. They resolve differences in a way that supports the business.

**Executive Coaching Improves Performance**

As Bob and Mark’s real-life example illustrates, coaching can be a valuable service to help executives overcome workplace conflict. A key component of the coaching process is the use of assessments, which can help the coach understand the ways clients manage and resolve conflict. Then the clients get insight about themselves and their co-workers and acquire tools to manage conflict in ways that create harmony and encourage productivity.

Training that contains a component on understanding individual differences, for example using psychometrics, provides client-facing staff with the insight that makes for lasting behavior change, rather than just a short-term cosmetic impact.

—CPP, Inc.
ABOUT A.J. O’CONNOR ASSOCIATES

A.J. O’Connor Associates’ (AJO) promise is that in everything we do, we strive to bring higher levels of performance into your organization. It is our business to know people and to understand how to create the path to an energized, engaged, and driven culture. Our success is measured through your success. Founded in 1983, A.J. O’Connor Associates is constantly evolving to meet the changing needs of our clients. Headquartered in the New York metropolitan area with a worldwide presence, we are positioned to meet our clients’ global needs.

AJO is a recognized leader in providing Human Capital Solutions that are right for your business and your bottom line. We assist Fortune 500 and mid-sized companies in achieving continuous and measurable improvement in their people’s performance. From executive assessment and coaching, leadership and organizational development to career transition, our seasoned leadership team will provide solutions tailored to fit your needs, improve performance and increase effectiveness throughout your organization—partnering with you at every level.

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