

Managing Conflict in Organizations



Conflict is inevitable in small businesses. Conflict can arise from a variety of sources, and between supervisors and subordinates, between co-workers, and between employees and customers. Managers and organizations can choose to see conflict as inherently negative, acting to suppress it at every opportunity, or as inherently positive, leveraging conflict to affect positive change.

Positive Perspective

Accept conflict as a natural growth process and influence your company culture to view constructive conflict positively. Conflict can be an asset to your small business if it is handled properly. It can help your organization to learn from its mistakes and identify areas of needed improvement. Innovation can be inspired from creative solutions to internal or external conflicts, and new ways of thinking can emerge.

Grievance Procedure

Create a formal grievance procedure for all employees. Let employees at all levels of your organization know that their voices will always be heard, and respond promptly and reasonably to employees' issues. This can prevent bad feelings from festering and growing into resentment and bitterness. Conflict is best handled quickly and openly. If your company culture is sufficiently friendly toward constructive conflict, your staff should see the value of letting their complaints, ideas and issues be heard.

Get to the Cause

Focus on deep-rooted causes rather than superficial effects when assessing conflicts. Parties to a conflict often claim to have issues with the behavior of co-workers or the outcome of company policies and work procedures, but these issues are likely being caused by something deeper. Attempting to resolve the conflict by addressing surface issues will rarely create meaningful change or lasting solutions. Look deeper to address the reasons that incidents occur.

As an example, if a supervisor finds himself constantly in conflict with a loyal employee due to falling productivity levels, the supervisor may naturally want to address the employee's behavior head-on. Upon closer analysis, however, the supervisor may realize that the employee has been increasingly dissatisfied with his job ever since last year's disappointing performance review. Revisiting the review with the employee may be much more effective than creating incremental performance goals for him.

Equal Voices

Give all parties to a conflict an equal voice, regardless of their position, length of service or political influence. Conflict participants can become defensive if they feel they are being marginalized or are going through a process leading to a predetermined outcome. It can be tempting to take the word of managers over front-line employees, or to take the word of a loyal employee over a new employee, but remember that your most trusted associates are not necessarily infallible. Go beyond simply giving everyone an equal chance to speak; give their arguments an equal weight in your mind when mediating a conflict.

Resolution Participation

Involve all parties, if possible, when drafting conflict resolutions. The theory of Management By Objectives (MBO) states that employees are generally more committed to goals that they have helped to create. The same holds true for conflict resolutions. There is more than one side to every conflict, and all sides should benefit from conflict resolution. Seek resolutions that will prevent the conflict from occurring again, rather than simply delaying a repeat occurrence.