Handout 17: Managing Conflict

Workmate - friend or foe?

Conflict is more than simply disagreement. In a conflict situation there is always the danger that relationships will be damaged. People who were formerly close and trusting may become estranged from each other. To be estranged is to be indifferent or hostile toward someone you once felt loyalty or affection for. And no, it's not just about divorce!

Often we have friendly relationships with our workmates. While this can give our work more enjoyment and meaning, it can also make us shy away from disagreement because we are afraid of conflict developing and friendships being damaged. Now recall the words of Heraclitus: "Opposition brings concord. Out of discord comes the fairest harmony". We need disagreements in our lives - they make us think, grow, discuss, make decisions, and are a characteristic of vibrant, evolving groups.

When in disagreement with somebody, be careful not to let yourself be flooded by the darker emotional states. Expressions of anger, disgust, judgement, or hostility will quickly arouse defensiveness and bring down some nasty weather in terms of communication climate. Conversely, don't let the value of loyalty override all your other values. Instead of 'looking out for your mates', think about doing them a favour by giving them honest feedback on their behaviour.

Keep the disagreement around the issues, not the personalities involved. You can attack issues, or problems, with as much energy as you like. Problems won't run away screaming (if only!) People might run away (or turn on you), should they feel they're being personally attacked. Say it loud: "I think the issue here is the appropriate use of petty cash", not "You embezzled petty cash for your fancy coffee, you thief!" Pound away at the issues, not your colleagues' skulls. Go hard on the problem, soft on the person. Share the satisfaction as you become allies to crack the problem.

Conflict is a team responsibility

Because conflict threatens relationships and morale it is important that everyone puts energy into its resolution. Don't try to fade into the wallpaper when things heat up around you. If you're not directly involved now is the time to step forward and help regulate the temperature of proceedings. You're not there to judge (however much others may want you to). What you can do is clarify, empathise, validate people's viewpoints, and encourage a climate of supportiveness, objectivity, respect, and openness. By not being as emotionally involved as the people in conflict you can help keep things civilised and focused on the issues. Encourage resolution. Don't throw up your hands, or crack jokes in an
attempt to nullify the conflict. For the participants it's very real and valid, so help them to find a way through it.

**Six tricks to fix the pricks**

"It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" Bible, NT Acts of the Apostles 9:5

Sometimes you have to deal with some tough customers - colleagues, clients, bureaucrats, two year olds... people that cause you to become angry or intimidated because of their attempts to have power over you. Here's a few tips for dealing with the bullies, jokers, sneerers and jeerers - not that you would ever resort to such name-calling.

1. Cultivate a relationship. Talk to them often. Find out what makes them tick, what their values are, what they care about. Build trust.

2. Don't reinforce rubbish. If they bellow opinions at you as if they were facts, remind them that they are giving opinions, not facts. Don't laugh at their jokes and jibes if you find them irritating. Stick to the issues. Do reinforce their efforts to: listen, understand, empathise, and problem solve.

3. Use control statements to get you the talking time you deserve. Examples are: "Please let me finish." "Could you not shout?"

4. Use active listening to untangle woolly arguments. Ask them to clarify, explain, be specific, say what exactly is bothering them or what they need. Ask why. "Why do you think that way is best? " "Why do you think we should just give up on that client?"

5. Stress the importance of getting agreement and moving forward. Lack of agreement could mean heavy handed intervention from above, or another meeting devoted to this issue. Tell them you're as keen to resolve the problem as they are.

6. Don't play the power game. There's no point in locking horns with raging bulls. Keep clarifying, paraphrasing, and helping them get it all out. When they're convinced you know what they're saying they may be ready to listen. So wait a while before you start disagreeing. Direct both your energies to attacking the problem. Involve others and get their opinion on the issues.

**Be assertive, be safe - conflict and clients**

Train yourself to be cool and calm in conflict situations. You may have family around you can practice with. Next time the resident two year old chucks a tantrum take a few breaths, smile, and relax before you respond. When you get it right with your own friends and family, you will be better equipped to deal with an angry client. Assume their viewpoint is legitimate (they will!) Acknowledge their feelings. Explore the issue as they see it. "I can see you're upset about this problem. What is it that upsets you?" At the same time, you don't need to indulge disrespectful or aggressive behaviour. "I can see you're upset. Put the knife down please, then we can talk about it". Use the assertive statement format : "When you wave that knife around (describe the behaviour) I feel nervous (name
your thought or feeling) so I won't continue this discussion (name the consequence) until you put it down (name what you want to change). Feel free to use control statements if you don't think you're being treated with respect. Be respectful, honest, and authentic yourself, and others will be compelled to follow your example.

Keep your body language conveying a message of confidence but not confrontation. That means open, slightly asymmetrical, and relaxed. Don't stand over, and don't cower and tremble.

Beware of making culturally biased assumptions. For example, Anglo-Australians give plenty of signs that they are upset. They drop hints, complain, show frustration, and generally provoke each other to ask what the hell is wrong with them. People from a Latin or Middle-Eastern background are more likely to brood, silently smouldering about a problem until it is expressed in one dramatic gesture. Then there is something to discuss! An Anglo-Australian worker is left wondering what hit them. (This is not to stereotype, but to illustrate the possibilities of a lack of cross-cultural awareness.)

Sometimes, especially when dealing with aggressive clients, you may need to back down. If they are prepared to violently emphasise a point - however wrong it may be - just agree, get out, and get safe. You have nothing to prove to a client that is worth getting hurt over.