

Managing

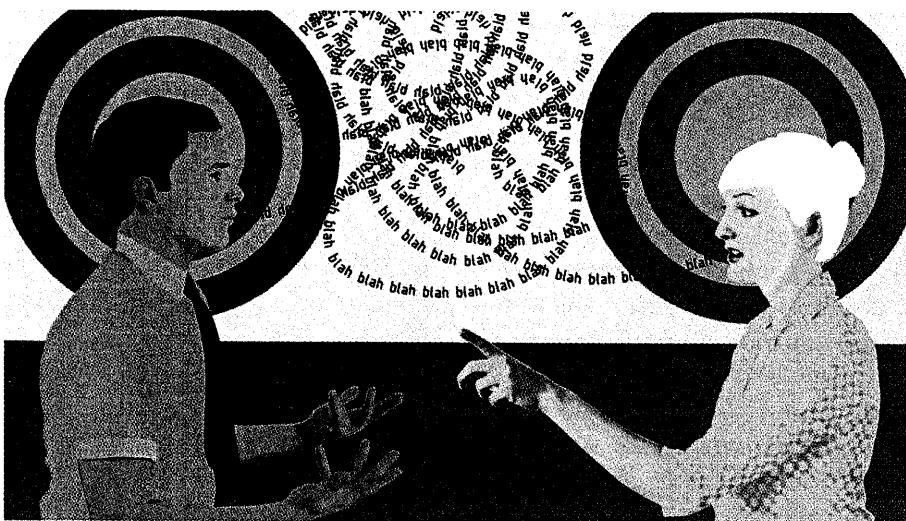
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Turning Conflict into Opportunity

Whenever you have more than one person in a single setting, there's a potential for conflict. Conflict is a natural part of our existence. Yet most of us want to escape it, ignore it, anything to avoid dealing with it. Our anxiety level goes up because we have never learned effective techniques for dealing with conflict. Far too often, disagreements are handled ineffectually at best, leaving lasting negative repercussions—conflict turned into combat.

But what would happen if, through the use of effective techniques, you could turn conflict around and actually offer individuals an opportunity to discuss their differences in a constructive way? To come to a negotiated outcome in which those involved believe that a win-win result has been achieved?

As a supervisor, dealing with the conflict around you is an essential management responsibility. Often there is much at stake, including the efficient and productive operation of



your practice. So, whether you are mediating between two or more individuals or directly involved in a disagreement, how should you, the manager, properly approach the situation?

Start with the Right Attitude

Begin by developing this outlook:

- Conflict is natural.
- It is not personal.
- You are committed to collaborating to find a win-win solution.

When you look at conflict as an opportunity to collaborate with others to find a creative solution to a real challenge, it lessens the anxiety and sets a mutually beneficial stage for those involved. A win-win doesn't mean that everyone gets what they want, but it does mean that they walk

away believing the best solution for all parties has been agreed on. This attitude—which removes the competitive element and shifts the conflict into the realm of a collaborative relationship—should be your guiding principle throughout the conflict management process.

With this attitude firmly in place, you can now outline a strategy for interacting with the individuals in conflict. Whether the disagreement involves you directly or those whom you supervise, think about what issues are important to you and why. Remember to separate the people from the problem. Conflict management is about resolving the *issue at hand*, not about the personalities involved.

For example, say that a disagreement between two co-workers is causing morale problems in the



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group as a whole. The poor morale affects the team's ability to meet your clients' needs. You must communicate this issue to the co-workers, allowing them to understand your perspective on it, why the process of resolving the conflict is important, and your overall goals for the process.

Seek First to Understand

When you're ready to hold a meeting with the people involved in the conflict, select a comfortable place. Use some small talk, even humor, to build rapport and reduce tension at the beginning of the meeting.

Now, take a page from Stephen Covey's best-seller *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and "seek first to understand." Identify the differing points of view in the room. Help the participants define the problem from their perspective—including what each views as the most important issues and why—so they can come to a mutual consensus about a definition of the problem.

The process requires that you listen carefully. Ask questions and test for accuracy to ensure that you fully comprehend what each person is trying to communicate. Encourage all involved to use active listening skills so that they, too, will "seek first to understand." Being heard and understood will move the participants from a mode of potential combat to one of working toward a common goal, a win-win solution.

As the process continues, use words that promote collaboration. Be aware of your voice tone and body language. Make eye contact. Should someone become emotional, do not allow yourself to respond in kind. Instead, continue to focus on understanding the issue behind the emotion, and by doing so, enabling the

person to gain control and approach the situation in a professional manner.

Negotiate a Win-Win

Once everyone has agreed on a definition of the problem, the process of negotiating its resolution begins. Ask the participants to generate a variety of possible solutions. Remind them that compromise and give-and-take will be essential to the success of this process. Help them find objective criteria for evaluating the potential solutions, including an acknowledgment of what each person views as most important.

Occasionally, the parties involved may agree on a solution that might not work in your setting. By asking how they think the solution will actually be implemented, you can help them figure out a solution that is more likely to be successful. In addition to implementation, ask them to identify specific ways in which the solution will work for all involved.

Throughout the process, keep this caution in mind: As a supervisor, it is tempting to come up with your own solution and implementation and to tell the parties involved that *this* is the way things will be done. All too often, that's exactly what occurs. But the result is that the supervisor becomes part of the problem and those involved in the conflict do not buy into the solution. The original conflict continues and no one wins. Always remember, success hinges on the participants' collaborating with each other.

When Everyone Walks Away Satisfied

When you complete the negotiation, take time to reflect on the things you did well and the things you would like to improve about your approach. Take

this opportunity to teach your employees how they can develop their conflict resolution skills, too. Create an atmosphere where everyone is committed to taking a reasoned approach—and guide them through the process. Not only will their own relationships be better for it, it will also allow you to be less involved in their future conflicts.

Yes, conflict will occur again, and the process of managing it and negotiating win-win solutions can always be further honed. The key is to understand that, as Max Lucade famously said, "Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional." LP

Action Plan

- When conflict arises, plan your strategy for dealing with it. Identify what your interests are and why they are important.
- Hold a meeting with those involved. Be sure that the environment is comfortable and that interruptions do not occur.
- Use active listening to fully understand each person's point of view. Identify common goals. Help participants come to consensus regarding the definition of the problem at hand. This makes the problem objective, rather than personal.
- Guide participants through brainstorming possible solutions, as well as selecting criteria for evaluating solutions. Help them find a win-win outcome. Use of your negotiation skills will be crucial.
- Once a win-win solution has been agreed on, have participants decide on implementation steps. Set up a follow-up meeting to make sure the negotiated solution is working.