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Benefiting from Workplace Conflict

*"The quality of our lives depends not on whether or not we have conflicts,
but on how we respond to them." ~ Tom Crum*

The devastating results of uncontrolled conflict can be seen everywhere in our daily lives—wars, domestic violence, road rage, etc. We attempt to avoid conflict because of the perceived consequences to ourselves or others. However, well-managed conflict can often serve as a catalyst for positive change.

The process of determining how we can benefit from conflict in the workplace comes from understanding why it occurs. Here are three characteristics that can set the stage for conflict.

- Conflict often represents inconsistencies in assumptions, values, and goals embraced by people, either stated or perceived.

- The concept of "power" plays a critical role in conflict because, if one person or group is attempting to gain advantage over others, disagreements can escalate.

- Conflict can actually be a warning signal for emerging tensions and issues existing under the surface of daily operations, serving as an opportunity to recognize and address issues during their early stages.

As much as we would like to avoid or even eliminate conflict in the workplace, human nature suggests that this is an unattainable goal. The next best option is to control the occurrence of conflict, so that the impacts can be managed in ways beneficial to staff, as well as the organization.

"The aim of an argument or discussion should not be victory, but progress." ~ Joseph Joubert

So, how do we manage conflict in the workplace to optimize the chances for positive outcomes, while minimizing potential problems?

- Controlled conflict within the workplace is not a disruption in communications or peaceful relations, but a natural "disagreement management" process that can be encouraged. Avoid placing negative or positive tags on conflict, it just is…

- Conflict—as discussed here—occurs between at least two people. Therefore, resolution needs to be perceived as mutual and as fair as possible.

- Address the issue of conflict proactively by establishing processes and rules within the workplace. Inform staff that conflict is appropriate, but only if expressed in acceptable ways and dealt with through communication and respect.

- Establish a strong teamwork culture among staff that involves open communication and a common sense of purpose. Employees who believe they can disagree safely, but with limits, will be best prepared to handle conflict successfully.

"Since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinion that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied." ~ John Stuart Mill

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