



Disputes at work can cause enormous damage to staff morale, customer confidence and performance.

stay away from the issues over which the conflict is taking place and from those they are in conflict with. For avoiders it is easier to withdraw (physically and psychologically) from a conflict than to face it.

Controller – shark

These people pursue their own goals at the expense of others. Relationships are of minor importance. They assume that one side winning and the other losing settles conflicts, and that they achieve higher status by winning. Losing gives them a sense of weakness, inadequacy and failure. They try to win by using power over others – attacking, overpowering, overwhelming and intimidating, and will also defend their position, either because they insist it is the only way forward, or simply to win.

Accommodator – friendly dog

This conflict management style originates from a strong need to maintain relationships. When conflict happens accommodators do not think that their own goals are important. They want to be accepted and liked by others. They think that conflicts should be resolved quickly to create harmony and believe that people cannot discuss conflicts without damaging relationships. They are afraid that if the conflict continues, someone will get hurt, and that will ruin the relationship. They give up their goals to preserve the relationship.

Collaborator – meercat

These people highly value their own goals but also relationships. They view a conflict as a problem to be solved, and a way for people to become more aware of others' needs. They are good at seeing other people's point of view, but do not forget their own goals. Sometimes, they are not satisfied until solutions are found and the tensions and negative feelings have been resolved.

These styles are comforting to us, and are resistant to change as they are affected by

our key life messages. So what style are you? Are you a friendly dog, a meercat, ostrich or shark?

Organisational conflict cultures are often conditioned by the approach of the senior or most influential people. Most leaders and managers adopt a range of styles. The most common we have found are the "accommodator", "avoider" and "controller". These are also the least likely to achieve effective outcomes and rebuild working relationships based on fairness and mutual respect.

Leaders in the modern workplace need to develop a more collaborative approach to conflict management (building skills so that conflict is handled early at its source) and dispute resolution (involving a third party when two or more colleagues have an unresolved dispute or grievance). When difficult issues such as allegations of bullying, grievances about a colleague's behaviour, complaints from customers occur, make sure that you:

- stay impartial
- listen to a range of perspectives before identifying key concerns and issues
- ask people to say what they need, rather than what they want done to the other person
- weigh up the benefit of settling amicably against risk of continuing the dispute
- build up your skills so that you can tailor your approach to achieve the best results for you, your colleagues and your organisation – if a situation needs a speedy task orientated approach then take it, but explain why, signpost how, and acknowledge how that might be difficult for some.

We suggest that dispute resolution be seen as a service that the organisation can provide. Try to establish some core values for effective dispute resolution:

- fairness
- consistency of process and minimum skill standards
- matching the approach and the outcomes to the situation – proportionate dispute resolution
- resolving disputes as close as possible to the source of the conflict
- seeking mutually acceptable outcomes where possible.

Another recent development is for organisations to develop their own team of internal dispute resolution specialists, often operating in a voluntary capacity. These can be:

- Mediators who will help parties resolve issues informally in a win/win collaborative way

- Facilitators who can help people identify and work on key issues, and resolve disputes in teams
- Investigators who are used to provide a consistent and robust process when issues need to be dealt with formally.

The advantage of having internal specialists is that they:

- Will be using their skills generally in all their roles in the organisation, not only when in specialist dispute resolution role. They will become beacons for effective dispute resolution
- Will acquire casework skills and confidence and be a useful resource for managers and staff
- Can respond speedily to situations
- Will demonstrate that an organisation is committed to supporting staff
- Enable employers to comply with legislation (in the UK) which requires organisations to have the capacity for early dispute resolution.

The main disadvantages are that:

- It can be difficult for internal dispute resolvers to prove their independence and impartiality
- Senior people rightly or wrongly trust external specialists above internal practitioners
- Previous failures of internal dispute resolution may undermine confidence.

Disputes can usually be predicted. Don't wait for them to happen and be caught cold. The circumstances in the modern workplace are ripe for conflict and disputes. Organisations which take a proactive approach are much more likely to harness diverse ideas, sustain trust under pressure, and survive change.

More information at:

www.conflictmanagementplus.com

Conflict is not going away. Disputes will continue to emerge and pose a risk for all organisations.