Causes of Conflict Within Organizations

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Ideally, in today's competitive business environment, we want to focus our time and energy on competing in the marketplace. Too often, though, we find people embroiled in conflicts internal to their organizations. Internal conflict can cost time, money and productivity. In itself, conflict is neutral -- it is simply a matter of two parties wanting different things from the same situation. What determines whether the conflict is productive or counterproductive is how we handle it, both at the employee and the leader level. While some people have developed, either intuitively or with training, the skills to handle conflict, many people, including very senior leaders, dread conflict and will do almost anything to avoid it. However, there are ways to analyze, creatively resolve, and learn from organizational conflicts.

Clarifying Causes of Conflict: From the Top to the Bottom of the Iceberg

Think of an organizational conflict as an iceberg. You are seeing visible signs of a conflict - low productivity, withdrawal, fighting -- above the water. But there is lots more going on beneath the surface -- within the organization, between and within teams, and within individuals. The first step is to clarify the causes of the conflict. Be prepared to find more than one cause -- and the longer the conflict has gone on, the more likely it is that relationships have been damaged.

Organizational Layer of the Iceberg

Look first for organizational causes. Finding these may enable you to make structural changes that help prevent future conflicts. Some questions to ask:

- Are there unclear accountabilities?

- Are there mismatched expectations?

- Are leaders clear at communicating what they expect?

- Have leaders provided the appropriate resources and support to meet the goals expected?

If you find some of these factors, you can help by sorting out who is accountable for what, clarifying expectations of involved parties, identifying organizational barriers to success, identifying resources (skills, people, budgets) needed to meet business goals, and encouraging clear, specific and direct feedback be given to involved parties. If a leader is at the centre of a conflict, a business or leadership coach can help with leadership skill development.

Interpersonal Layer of the Iceberg

Look next at the interpersonal layer:

- How well are people working together?

- Have teams built skills in teamwork?

- Are there personality style mismatches?

- Are there values mismatches?

Difficulties you uncover can be addressed through team building, through education using personality style and values inventories, and through frank discussion about how to creatively address the mismatches. However, this is a trickier area to get

involved in and there are times when the relationship has deteriorated so much, and the mismatches are so great, that the interpersonal level of conflict cannot be resolved. In this case, the organization has to make some choices: if it is a large enough organization, people can be transferred to other areas, if not, someone may no longer be able to work effectively in that organization.

Individual Layer of the Iceberg
The final place to look for the cause of conflict is in the individual or intrapersonal layer. Frequently, conflicts are written off as a problem with an individual. If, however, you first assume that an individual is the cause of a conflict before you do the organizational analysis, you may miss the structural factors such as inadequate hiring, promotion, and training procedures. Addressing these structural inadequacies can add lasting value to your organization. When all of the analysis has been done, you may find that a person is in the wrong job, or has mismatched skills, values, and attitudes for the organization. Training, skill development, coaching, career counselling and other tools may help when a clear cause of the conflict is at the individual layer.

Putting It All Together
Conflicts in organizations can be complex to sort out; as you go further down each layer of the iceberg, you find deeper issues to resolve. Yet by following a systematic clarification process, you can uncover organizational causes that can be addressed creatively to prevent future non-productive conflicts from occurring. Effective learning can result for all of the people involved, including the ability to spot a non-productive conflict early and turn it into a productive one that will help develop improved

methods of achieving positive business results.

Please see table next page.

Causes of conflict	Tools & methods to help
Organizational	**Organizational**
Unclear accountabilities	RACI charts, accountability agreements, role descriptions
Mismatched expectations	Expectation changes
Leader communication of expectations	Feedback and coaching to leader
Resources and support inadequate to meet business goals	Feedback and coaching to leader, remove organizational barriers, provide resources
Interpersonal	**Interpersonal**
How well are people working together? Have teams built skills in teamwork?	Teambuilding
Are there personality style matches?	Personality inventories, education, mediation
Values mismatches?	Values inventories, education, mediation. For values mismatches, there may not be a way to resolve, depending on how great the mismatch
Intrapersonal	**Intrapersonal**
Mismatched skills for job	Training, skill development
Mismatched values for job/organization	Counselling, coaching, if mismatch not too great
Mismatched attitudes for job/organization	Clear and specific feedback, coaching, if mismatch not too great