



From Conflict to Collaboration



by Greg Giesen

I'M OFTEN ASKED TO perform a quick fix on two or more people who are not getting along. Usually, I'm summoned to help them work out their differences. As a conflict mediator, I happy to help resolve disputes; however, I find that happy endings are rare. Often the conflicts that arise are symptomatic of bigger problems, system errors—things like poor leadership, dysfunctional work groups, inadequate performance management, and a lack of soft skills training and resources.

It is a mistake to limit the scope of conflict mediation to the immediate players in the dispute. You also need to look at the system. Without such an assessment, managers can easily get into the habit of treating the symptom while ignoring the problem.

Four Checkpoints

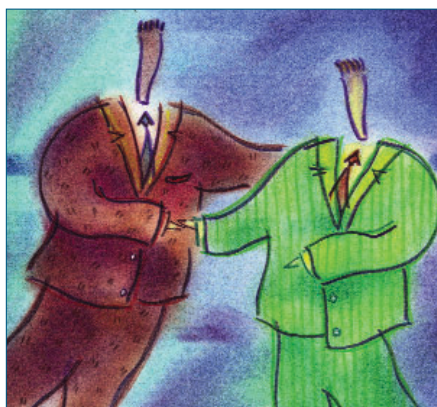
To assess the system factors that add to conflicts, I use four checkpoints:

Checkpoint 1: Is leadership being demonstrated? First check the leader to assess whether the conflict is a symptom of a bigger problem. Look for efforts made by the leader to address the conflict. Is the leader modeling effective conflict resolution skills? What has the leader done to create a supportive environment? Does the leader address conflicts? Is the leader held accountable for resolving conflicts? Are effective conflict resolution skills being practiced? If leaders are ineffective in handling conflict, are they are receiving any coaching or guidance?

Checkpoint 2: Do co-workers or team members foster a supportive environment for conflict resolution? Co-workers and team members (including those involved in the conflict) share responsibility for the interpersonal dynamics within their group. Look for group norms around conflict, who is impacted by the conflict, what isn't hap-

pening that needs to happen to resolve conflict, how the group sees the role of the leader, what guidance and support does the group need from the leader.

Checkpoint 3: Is there an accountability that supports teamwork and communication skills? Define appropriate behaviors. What gets reinforced is the behavior that gets exhibited. Are conflict resolution skills part of the criteria in performance reviews? Are core values reflected in the review process? Are team norms identified around conflict resolution and followed consistently? Is peer input part of the performance review process? Is the disciplinary process ever used for employees who exhibit poor communication or



cooperation skills? The performance review process must reflect the desired skill sets required for effective conflict resolution. These include teaming skills, communication and problem-solving, collaborative and listening skills. Create accountability around these skills to foster effective communication and conflict resolution.

Checkpoint 4: Is the organization providing skill training and resources to maintain effective working relationships. It takes a proactive philosophy when it comes to effective communication and conflict resolution skills. Proficiency in the soft skills area requires time, effort and practice. By helping their people to grow in these areas, managers can't empower them to resolve their own conflicts.

If any one of these four "check-

points" are suspect, the conflicts that arise will likely be symptoms of a system error. If two or more of the are lacking, the system is faulty.

So, the next time there is a conflict, investigate whether or not the conflict is an isolated event or a system error. You might be surprised by what you find.

Creating Collaboration

The goal of collaboration is to achieve a desired outcome in the best way possible for all parties. Cooperation, synergy and teamwork can only be achieved if the parties pay as much attention to how they work together as they do to the work itself.

Before agreeing to collaborate, people must know the key elements: parity among participants, mutual goals, shared responsibility for participation and decision making, shared resources, shared accountability for outcomes, and mutual trust. Collaboration is a highly interdependent process that requires an upfront commitment to work within these elements from all participating entities before going forward.

The collaborative process involves creating guidelines for how people will work together. You might customize these seven items to fit your situation: 1) Bring the parties together; 2) define the scope of the project; 3) define success, expectations, or desired results; 4) discuss leadership, roles, responsibilities, support, ownership, control, communication, decision-making, time management, prioritization, disagreements, accountability, resources, milestones, rewards, recognition, and evaluation; 5) identify possible barriers to collaboration and problem solve around those; 6) identify components that may not need to be completed collaboratively; and 7) obtain a commitment to collaborate from each member to move forward under the guidelines.

Once people engage in the collaborative process, they are well on their way to achieving superior results. The process is not for everyone or for all situations that call for greater teamwork. It needs to be used with the right people, for the right reasons, and with the full support of management. **EE**

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Action: Use these four checkpoints.