Solving Conflicts at Work (Part 1)

To address conflicts within the workplace, these tools may be applied in two ways:

- For managers to guide their own behavior and the behavior of those they manage.
- For HR professionals to use when coaching managers and others.

Rule 1: Keep It Civil

Treating people with respect is the bedrock. No matter the message, never be judgmental and always behave in ways that allow others to maintain their self-esteem.

Rule 2: Disagreement Is OK

There's nothing inherently wrong with disagreement. In fact, it can be productive. The key is how to handle it.

You're free to disagree with anyone, anytime about anything, provided you first confirm the position of the person you're about to disagree with. "Jim, if I understand you correctly, you believe we should adopt policy 'X' based on 'Y.' Is that correct?"

It's only after the other person confirms that you correctly understood him or her that you should express a contrary view.

In other words, don't make assumptions!

Rule 3: Keep It Solution-Oriented

When problems arise, address them promptly, directly, and with a view to what caused the problem and the remedy, both short term and long term. The key is to look for solutions rather than blame. It's not about who screwed up. It's about where we go from here.

What happened in the past is in the rearview mirror. Most of your attention should be on the road ahead. Colleen McManus, SHRM-SCP, a senior HR executive with the state of Arizona, describes a great mentor of hers: "He often said, 'We fix the problem, not the blame.' He lived by that, too, in the way that he addressed problems. This kept all of us focused on the big picture and the greater good as opposed to our own egos or who deserved to 'win' or 'lose' the point."

This doesn't mean suspending accountability. In this example, the investigation into allegations of sexual harassment and retaliation against a senior government official led to his resignation.

Rule 4: Confront the Well, Not the Elephant

Have you ever encountered an elephant in the room? Instead of confronting the elephant, we tend to avoid it. As a result, it gets bigger and bigger.

Instead of the elephant, I prefer the metaphor of the well, based on a biblical story in which the negotiation of using a well at Beersheba produced the longest period of true peace between two peoples.

The lesson was this: To resolve conflict, the parties must disclose all their "wells," which are those things that could undermine a potentially positive and collaborative relationship.

When a grievance arises, the person feeling aggrieved should ask: "Is this a well?" The answer might be "yes," "no" or "I don't know yet." If the answer is "no, I can live with this," then let it go. If the answer is "I don't know yet," monitor the situation and periodically revisit the question.

If the answer is "Yes, this is a well," that means that if the parties remain on the present course, there will not be the mutual trust and respect necessary to function effectively. The immediate next question should be "What's my plan?"

In putting your plan together, I especially recommend the [No-FEAR confrontation method](#).

Conclusion

In organizations, people will sometimes rub each other the wrong way. The key to resolving conflict is a non-negotiable commitment to the above rules of behavior. By committing to these principles, you empower everyone in your organization to hold themselves and each other accountable.