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Module 4

Learner Manual

PSPGEN021 Contribute to conflict management

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

This Learner Manual addresses the Unit of Competency PSPGEN097 Contribute to conflict management.

The Learning Objectives are:

- Summarise the typical stages of conflict.
- Summarise the process of developing a team.
- Summarise potential sources of conflict in an organisation.
- Describe conflict management techniques.
- Summarise the stages of conflict resolution.

Recognising Conflict

Conflict Theory

Five stages of conflict:

1. Latent Stage: Participants not yet aware of conflict.
2. Perceived Stage: Participants aware a conflict exists.
3. Felt Stage: Stress and anxiety.
4. Manifest: Conflict is open and can be observed.
5. Aftermath: Outcome of conflict, resolution or dissolution.

Most of the time, recognizing and addressing issues that cause conflict will lead to a fast and effective resolution. The problem lies in the fact that solutions are not always so easy. When both parties feel they have been wronged and expect their demands to be met, then conflict can escalate. Many places are melting pots of conflict. The most prominent area of life that sees the five stages of conflict is the workplace. In most cases neither party wants to be there in the first place and this time of heightened stress lends itself to conflict. To understand more about workplace conflict and resolutions you can take classes in workplace conflict resolution.

It is important to understand conflict at a psychological level if one hopes to be able to resolve it quickly and effectively. In most cases one party, usually the less fortunate, or aggrieved, party is aware of conflict early in the latency stage. The more privileged party is often unaware that conflict exists because there are no adverse effects of conflict-starting events. The existent added stress makes the latent stage dangerous because at times the other stages can reveal themselves all at once in a flurry of emotion and passion. This is why it is important to recognize the signs of conflict as early as possible so that they may be addressed.

People must be Democratic and address their differences of opinion openly and without fear of misunderstandings. If problems are not addressed then conflict can move from latent to “manifest”, “erupted”, or “emerging” stages of conflict.

Emergence occurs when latent conflict builds and builds until a triggering event occurs. This triggering event, depending on how severe, causes an eruption which may end quickly or can last for a long

time. Now that conflict has emerged, either the conflict is resolved or it escalates until a stalemate is reached or someone concedes.

Escalation of conflict generally lasts a long time, but can also end quickly. Once conflicts escalate for a while, participants often reach a stalemate: a situation in which neither side can win, but neither side wants to back down or accept loss either. Stalemates emerge for a number of reasons: failed tactics, depletion of available resources to fuel the conflict, or a reduction in support of the conflict by one or more of those involved. In other cases, the conflict has been latent for so long that the triggering event usually leads to a violent resolution.¹

Group Processes

When developing a team, it helps a great deal to have some basic sense of the stages that a typical team moves through when evolving into a high-performing team. Awareness of each stage helps leaders to understand the reasons for members' behaviour during that stage, and to guide members to behaviour required to evolve the team into the next stage.

1. Forming

Members first get together during this stage. Individually, they are considering questions like, "What am I here for?", "Who else is here?" and "Who am I comfortable with?" It is important for members to get involved with each other, including introducing themselves to each other. Clear and strong leadership is required from the team leader during this stage to ensure the group members feel the clarity and comfort required to evolve to the next stage.

2. Storming

During this stage, members are beginning to voice their individual differences, join with others who share the same beliefs, and jockey for position in the group. Therefore, it is important for members to continue to be highly involved with each other, including to voice any concerns in order to feel represented and understood. The team leader should help members to voice their views, and to achieve consensus (or commonality of views) about their purpose and priorities.

3. Norming

In this stage, members are beginning to share a common commitment to the purpose of the group, including to its overall goals and how each of the goals can be achieved. The team leader should focus on continuing to clarify the roles of each member, and a clear and workable structure and process for the group to achieve its goals.

4. Performing

In this stage, the team is working effectively and efficiently toward achieving its goals. During this stage, the style of leadership becomes more indirect as members take on stronger participation and involvement in the group process. Ideally, the style includes helping members to reflect on their experiences and to learn from them.

5. Closing and Celebration

¹ <https://blog.udemy.com/stages-of-conflict/>

At this stage, it is clear to members and their organisation that the team has achieved its goals (or a major milestone along the way toward the goal). It is critical to acknowledge this point in the life of the team, lest members feel unfulfilled and sceptical about future team efforts.²

Workplace Structure and Culture

Potential Conflict in an Organisation

There can be many different areas of potential conflict in an organisation. These can include:

Conflict Within the Board

- Between a board member and the chairperson.
- Between board members.
- Board meetings - when disagreements arise or when meeting procedures are not being followed.
- Cultural clashes - people from different cultural backgrounds may have values and interests that conflict with each other.
- Conflict of interest when a board member may profit from a specific arrangement that the board is considering e.g.: a board member who has a business enterprise and wants the board to purchase his/her goods and/or services.

Conflict Within the Organisation

- Nepotism - e.g.: Hiring or favouring a relative.
- Jealousy - e.g.: One person or family seen to have more power on the board or in the organisation.
- Between the manager or chief executive officer (CEO) and the board - e.g.: Spending disagreement.
- Between board members and staff (including management).
- Between management and staff.
- Between management (e.g.: CEO and manager).
- Between staff (e.g.: Finance manager & manager).
- Between committees.
- Between staff from different cultural backgrounds.

Conflict Between Organisation and Community

- Differing visions for development of community.
- Different priorities.
- Lack of consultation with community.
- Lack of understanding of the role of the board.
- The community feels the board is not acting in the community's best interests.
- Disagreement over decisions.
- The organisation's activities are not seen to be benefiting the community.

² <https://management.org/groups/dynamics-theories.htm>

Conflict Between Organisation and the Wider Community

- Native Title land claims - e.g.: conflicts of interest between mining companies or farmers and organisation.
- Between organisation and government departments.
- Legal conflicts - e.g.: if someone on the board or in the organisation does not follow legal requirements or organisational processes.
- Racism - e.g.: organisation or individuals within it unable to carry out functions due to racism in wider community.
- Perception in wider community that Aboriginal organisations are given free government handouts.

The Role of Power in Conflict Management

Power determines the way people interact with each other and subsequently, the way they engage in conflicts and conflict resolution. Power-holders are best able to asymmetrically enforce their will and therefore, they have the capability to determine the process and the outcome of a conflict.³

Positional Power

A leader acquires positional power from their status or position in the organisation, i.e. it is the authority provided to a person because of the rank they occupy within the organisational structure or hierarchy. People with positional power are bound by the rules and regulations that have been established by the organisation or institution to which they belong. The main aim of this kind of power is to make sure that people work together with one another to achieve the goals of the organisation. Positional power makes sure that people work in a specific way and towards the same objectives.

Leaders with positional power have the authority to hire and fire people, offer them rewards or punishments and provide instructions and directions to all those who are working under them.

Positional power is awarded to a person because of their rank or title in an organization. Hence, as it is based on external factors, it is possible to take it away from individuals.

Personal Power

To be highly effective leaders, one needs something more than just a designation or a title. It needs personal power, which is the power given to an individual because of their personal skills and competencies. It is the power awarded to individuals by others, and is not formally assigned by the organization. Personal power is linked to a person's integrity and their readiness to live up to their promises. It is essentially a form of power that inspires and motivates other people to be fully involved in achieving the goals and objectives of the organisation.

Personal power emerges from the personal characteristics of a person; hence, it is internal in nature, and emerges from internal features of a person, such as credibility, intelligence, skills and experience, self-confidence, etc. Therefore, it cannot be taken away from a person.⁴

³ <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/74603>

⁴ <https://www.termscompared.com/positional-power-vs-personal-power/>

Conflict Management

Managing Emotions

Conflict can involve powerful negative emotions and can cause people to engage in negative behaviour that escalates conflict and damages relationships.

It is extremely important that when you find yourself in a conflict situation, that you can recognise how you are feeling and take steps to regulate your emotions to remain in control. In fact, studies have shown that people who are better able to regulate their emotions are also better at resolving conflict.

Fight or Flight

The fight or flight response, also known as the acute stress response, is our body's primitive response to danger or stress. Whenever we perceive there to be a harmful event, our body releases a whole bunch of hormones that get us ready to either fight or flee the threat. This causes a number of symptoms, including increased heart rate, dry mouth, shaking, flushed face, and sweating. And once triggered, it can take between 20-60 minutes for your body to return to a calm state.

Even though a situation of conflict may not present immediate danger, for a lot of people, it still triggers the fight or flight response. When this response is triggered, you may find it difficult to think clearly and act rationally - both of which are required to effectively manage a conflict situation.

To help calm yourself down:

- **Acknowledge how you are feeling.** The first step is to acknowledge to yourself that you are in a heightened emotional state. It snaps you out of acting on autopilot and puts you back in control. The feelings won't subside, but at least you can take steps to calm yourself down.
- **Breathe.** In this state you will naturally take shorter, faster breaths which can make you more anxious. Focus on your breathing and take slow deep breaths. Breathing with purpose has been shown to help regulate emotions and stress.
- **Take time out.** If you find that you just can't continue, take some time to cool off.

Emotional Triggers

Everyone has things that will trigger an emotional response. The problem with emotional triggers is that if someone hits your trigger, an emotional response will follow almost instantaneously, often without you even being conscious of it.

If this happens it is very easy to lose your cool before you realise it's happened. However, if you know your triggers, you are conscious of when they have been/are being pressed. It may not stop you from feeling the emotions, but it certainly puts you in a much better position to control your reactions.

Things that may trigger an emotional response may include:

- Blame or excuses.
- Negative talk (e.g.: "It can't be done").
- Criticism of your work.
- Criticism of you as a person.
- Hostile or aggressive behaviour (e.g.: sarcasm, back chat, yelling).

Know when to Engage and when to Avoid

Before dealing with a conflict, it is important to reflect on your current emotional state and assess whether you are in a state to be able to handle your emotions properly. Think to yourself "How would I react if someone pressed a trigger right now?".

If you are already in a heightened emotional state (e.g.: anxious, angry, frustrated) it's going to take a lot less for you to lose control of your emotions. You might even get into an argument just to vent your anger.

Evaluating your emotional state can help you decide whether you are able to deal with the conflict now, or whether it's best for you to deal with it later.⁵

Overcoming Barriers to Communication

Barriers to communication in the workplace are anything that prevent or misconstrue the effective delivery of messages among employees and leadership within a company or organization. The three typical types of barriers to communication are:

1. **Physical:** Physical barriers to communication deal with the environmental surroundings at your job. Examples include the layout of an office that obstructs the view of coworkers, the nature of remote work which can slow communication efforts, and literal closed doors that discourage interaction.
2. **Emotional:** Emotional barriers to communication can arise from feelings of doubt or anxiety. An intimidating supervisor might cause anxiety among employees, discouraging open discussions.
3. **Linguistic:** Linguistic barriers to communication include the written, verbal, and physical cues used to convey a message. When individuals speak different languages, the use of unfamiliar jargon, vague body language, or differing dialects can cause communication gaps.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers to Communication in the Workplace

Consider the following tips to address communication barriers at work and help you improve communication at work.

- **Be fully present.** It takes concentration and practice to focus on others' ideas with an open mind. Withhold any assumptions about the information being shared with you as you listen. Listen attentively and wait until later to provide feedback.
- **Be specific in your information.** Share pertinent details succinctly to make information easy to understand and remember. Be concise and give others the opportunity to ask clarifying questions to make the exchange of information dynamic.
- **Use words and a tone that convey confidence.** Work on eliminating words like, "um, like," and "ah" and phrases such as, "I think that" which don't add to the information and may distract your audience. Instead, consider using properly timed pauses when talking to give yourself an opportunity to collect your thoughts and others a chance to reflect on what you said and to respond if needed. Your voice should be optimistic, and language should vary in speed to reflect enthusiasm.
- **Encourage questions.** Be inviting and prompt others you communicate with consistently to ask questions. This helps you see different perspectives and can lead to the understanding and discovery of ways to avoid communication pitfalls in the future. Through an open dialogue, you can also learn

⁵ <https://www.leadershipsuccess.co/conflict-management/managing-your-emotions>

about differing communication styles in your workplace and adjust your methods to meet the needs of all.⁶

Strategies for Respecting Culture

Strategies for resolving conflict should be found that respect culture. These may include:

- Consultative process.
- Protecting individuals from shame disciplining within the organisation.
- Non-confrontational approach.
- Using traditional methods if appropriate.

Consultative Process

A consultative process for dealing with conflict is one where everyone involved in the conflict is brought together to discuss it. Everyone has a part to play in resolving the conflict in a consultative process.

If necessary, Elders or other respected members of the community may also be consulted on the best way of dealing with the conflict situation. This is essential in communities that still practice traditional ways.

In a consultative process, everyone is given a chance to tell their side of the story. This can be done in an informal way, by sitting down with the person and talking with them about what happened.

Protecting Individuals from Shame

People should be taken aside to calmly discuss conflict issues in private. They should not be shamed by having someone yell at them in front of their fellow Board members, fellow staff members, or others.

Conflict should never be dealt with in a heated or shaming way.

Disciplining within the Organisation

Where possible, any discipline over conflict situations should be done within the organisation. For example, if a normally even-tempered employee blew up one day and had a big fight with another employee, would you (a) call the police, or (b) tell them to go home, cool down and think about their actions before returning to work? Option (b) would be more culturally appropriate and more supportive to the employee.

Non-confrontational Approach

A confrontational approach is when a boss screams at an employee. This puts the other person's back up immediately and can shame them in front of others.

In a non-confrontational approach, the person is not put in a position of feeling shamed, or having to defend themselves. It also gives them a chance to explain what went wrong.

A non-confrontational approach is a gentler way of dealing with conflict and can prevent conflict from getting out of hand.

⁶ <https://www.glassdoor.com/blog/guide/barriers-to-communication-in-the-workplace/>

Using Traditional Methods if Appropriate

In some situations, particularly serious offences, it can be necessary and appropriate to use traditional methods of resolving the conflict. This depends on whether the community has a system in place to enable it to carry out traditional conflict resolution.

In some remote Aboriginal communities, Elders have been given the power by the community and their lore to carry out traditional forms of punishment where appropriate.

The Justice System in Victoria allows an Indigenous representative on the Court Bench to help the Judge pass an appropriate sentence.

In New South Wales, the Justice System has a circle sentencing program where Elders pass judgement on the sentencing of Aboriginal offenders.

Stages of Conflict Resolution

Step 1: Define the Source of the Conflict.

The more information you have about the cause of the problem, the more easily you can help to resolve it. To get the information you need, certain resolution strategies can be adopted as follows. Use a series of questions to identify the cause, like, "When did you feel upset?" "Do you see a relationship between that and this incident?" "How did this incident begin?"

As a manager or supervisor, you need to give both parties the chance to share their side of the story. It will give you a better understanding of the situation, as well as demonstrate your impartiality. As you listen to each disputant, a conflict resolution technique is to say, "I see" or "uh huh" to acknowledge the information and encourage them to continue to open up to you.

Step 2: Look Beyond the Incident.

Often, it is not the situation but the point of view of the situation that causes anger to fester and ultimately leads to a shouting match or other interpersonal conflict.

The source of the workplace conflict might be a minor issue that occurred months before, but the level of stress has grown to the point where the two parties have begun attacking each other personally instead of addressing the real problem. In the calm of your office, you can get them to look beyond the triggering incident to see the real cause. Once again, probing questions will help ease a disagreement, like, "What do you think happened here?" or "When do you think the problem between you first arose?"

Step 3: Request Solutions.

After getting each party's viewpoint, the next step is to get them to identify how the situation could be changed. Again, question the conflicting parties to solicit their ideas: "How can you make things better between you?" When managing conflict as a mediator, you have to be an active listener, aware of every verbal nuance, as well as a good reader of body language.

You want to get the disputants to stop fighting and start cooperating, and that means steering the discussion away from finger pointing and toward ways of resolving the conflict.

Step 4: Identify Solutions Both Disputants can Support.

You are listening for the most acceptable course of action. Point out the merits of various ideas, not only from each other's perspective, but in terms of the benefits to the organization. For instance, you

might suggest the need for greater cooperation and collaboration to effectively address team issues and departmental problems.

Step 5: Agreement.

The mediator needs to get the two parties to shake hands and accept one of the alternatives identified in Step 4. The goal is to reach a negotiated agreement. Some mediators go as far as to write up a contract in which actions and time frames are specified. However, it might be sufficient to meet with the individuals and have them answer these questions: “What action plans will you both put in place to prevent conflicts from arising in the future?” and “What will you do if problems arise in the future?”

This mediation process works between groups as well as individuals.⁷

Legislation and Workplace Policies Relating to Conflict Management

A policy is a statement which underpins how human resource management issues will be dealt with in an organisation. It communicates an organisation’s values and the organisation’s expectations of employee behaviours and performance.

Workplace policies often reinforce and clarify standard operating procedure in a workplace. Well written policies help employers manage staff more effectively by clearly defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the workplace, and set out the implications of not complying with those policies.

A workplace policy consists of a statement of purpose and one or more broad guidelines on action to be taken to achieve that purpose. The statement of purpose should be written in simple terms, free of jargon. The length of the policy may vary depending on the issue it addresses.

A policy may allow discretion in its implementation and the basis of that discretion should be stated as part of the policy. A policy may also be required where there is a diversity of interests and preferences, which could result in vague and conflicting objectives among those who are directly involved.

Not all workplace issues require a policy. Many routine matters can be dealt with through simple workplace procedures and processes being put in place.

Policy Checklist

A workplace policy should:

- Set out the aim of the policy.
- Explain why the policy was developed.
- List who the policy applies to.
- Set out what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour.
- Set out the consequences of not complying with the policy.
- Provide a date when the policy was developed or updated.

⁷ <https://www.amanet.org/articles/the-five-steps-to-conflict-resolution/>

Policies also need to be reviewed on a regular basis and updated where necessary. For example, if there is a change in equipment or workplace procedures you may need to amend your current policy or develop a new one.

Employment law changes, changes to your award or agreement may also require a review of your policies and procedures. Stay up to date with relevant changes by regularly checking Fair Work Ombudsman.

Legal Requirements under the *Fair Work Act 2009*

Awards and agreements specify dispute resolution procedures for the employees they cover. You can apply these if a grievance arises in your workplace that is related to the award or agreement, or to the National Employment Standards (NES).⁸

Types of Workplace Policies

Here are some examples of common workplace policies that could assist your workplace:

- Code of conduct.
- Recruitment policy.
- Internet and email policy.
- Mobile phone policy.
- Non-smoking policy.
- Drug and alcohol policy.
- Health and safety policy.
- Anti-discrimination and harassment policy.
- Grievance handling policy.
- Discipline and termination policy.
- Using social media.⁹

⁸ <https://www.business.qld.gov.au/running-business/employing/high-performing-workplaces/conflict>

⁹ <https://www.industrialrelations.nsw.gov.au/employers/nsw-employer-best-practice/workplace-policies-and-procedures-checklist/>