



Are You An Ostrich, A DIYer Or A Bureaucrat When It Comes To Managing Conflict?

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 30 November 2021

Everyone has preferences when it comes to dealing with difficult issues. Starting in early childhood, these predispositions are carried through to adulthood and into the workplace too. While they might feel familiar and comfortable, they may also be fueling conflict.

Managers can prevent conflict from getting out of hand by recognizing their natural tendencies, understanding the impact on their team, and choosing a more effective approach. Once they are able to do this, they will also benefit from the potential opportunities conflict can bring.

1. Ignoring - 'The Ostrich'

When faced with conflict, a common approach is to simply ignore the issue. A busy manager may feel that they don't have the time to deal with it, hoping it will go away or resolve itself. The 'head in the sand' option might also be due to a lack of skills and confidence, not knowing how to best deal with the situation, or being driven by the fear of upsetting a colleague or making things worse.

Turning a blind eye will likely make the issue fester and grow. Those involved in conflict tend to spend time talking to teammates, who then take sides, so conflict spreads, 'infecting' the rest of the team. The next time an issue arises between the parties, it falls in fertile ground and escalates faster, and the underlying problems are never tackled.

A better approach is to address it, keeping a lookout for the warning signs of conflict and acting on them promptly. A busy manager could reflect on how taking time to resolve conflict now will save time in the future. If underlying fear is at the heart of inaction, conflict management training can build skills and confidence.

2. Fixing - 'The DIYer'

For many managers, their 'go-to' approach is to fix conflict. For the time-poor manager, this can appear as the quickest and easiest route. To 'fix' it, a manager may speak to the parties, find out the facts, come up with a resolution and deliver it as their decision.

The fixer's approach has drawbacks. Firstly, no one likes to be told what to do. When people feel that their choices are taken away, they may adopt or strengthen a view opposite to that intended - a behavior called psychological reactance. Those involved don't buy into the solution and therefore follow it reluctantly or avoid it.

Another downside of this approach is that it denies people the opportunity to gain experience and learn skills to deal with conflict, which is valuable in building confidence and resilience. Team members can also feel that their manager doesn't trust them and are less likely to feel empowered to solve future issues themselves.

A more effective approach for a manager is to switch from fixing to facilitating. First, speak to each person individually and ask them how they feel about the situation and how it impacts them. Then encourage a direct conversation, or offer a joint meeting, and support the teammates in coming up with a solution together.

3. Formalizing - 'The Bureaucrat'

Another common approach is to direct team members to formal channels, sending them to HR or suggesting they make a complaint in writing. There are instances when issues need to be reported, but formal routes are often unnecessary for many other conflict issues and may make matters worse.

The bureaucrat's approach shares many pitfalls of that of the fixer and brings others too. Once issues are dealt with formally, parties tend to become more entrenched in their views. Formal processes can also take a long time, six months or more, making them costly, deepening broken relationships, and disrupting the team.

Instead of resorting to formal routes, the enlightened manager can encourage an informal approach, with direct conversation as the first point of call. This may result in teams developing a team conflict charter, which describes how they would like to communicate with each other and how they will handle conflicts that arise.

Organizations can cultivate a less formal approach by ensuring that policies reflect informal resolution first and providing skills training and online resources. If direct or facilitated conversations haven't resolved an issue, workplace mediation can be an effective alternative.

When faced with conflict, managers should aspire to be an owl rather than an ostrich, DIYer, or bureaucrat. An owl can turn its head nearly 360 degrees (270 degrees to be precise). For a manager, this means the ability to look out for potential issues and see the world from a wide range of perspectives. And of course, it's widely admired for being wise, something most managers aspire to.