Leading Through Conflict: Three Learning Strategies For Leaders

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 15 May 2023

As a manager, there is an expectation that your role will involve resolving workplace conflict in your team quickly and effectively. When you take on a leadership role, you'll likely have to deal with more complex and challenging issues. Colleagues may expect you to solve their conflicts for them. But, this can become a vicious cycle of you fixing their problems, rather than team members learning how to deal with conflict themselves.

A proactive leader creates the future, supports staff to learn the right skills to deal with challenges themselves, and guides the organization to build conflict resilience. Dealing with conflict is a lifelong journey of learning, so as we start Learning at Work Week, here are three ways you can help yourself, your team, and your organization, become future fit to resolve conflict.

Help yourself learn

Before assisting others on their learning journey, it's useful to understand what part you play in this. Your preferences for responding to conflict will dictate how you deal with issues, and will also have an impact on others. For example, if you view conflict as negative and avoid it, your staff may take the same view, holding back from useful challenge and debate, which in turn may lead to issues festering and growing. This is why a useful starting point is to do some self-reflection and recognize the influence your approach to conflict has on you, your team and others.

You can also acknowledge your responsibility as a leader to take a more proactive approach to conflict by learning to spot the warning signs of relationship tensions in your team. There are obvious indicators – such as when emotions run high and heated words are exchanged – and subtle indicators – such as team members copying you into their emails when this is unnecessary, or becoming quieter and seemingly disengaged. What is visible to you may be the tip of the iceberg, which is why it is useful to notice the early signs that will allow you to catch issues quickly and then explore what is going on for people in your team.

Help your team learn

As a leader, your team members will look to you for advice or to make a decision on what's 'right' and fix it. Your support to them is based on the considerable experience you've gained in working life. However, it's common for leaders not to have received specific conflict management training, let alone been trained in the key skills relevant to a leader. This not only applies to conflict resolution skills, but also the skills to encourage and manage conflict constructively within a team, which is critical to high-performing teams, and brings benefits such as creativity, innovation, and stronger relationships.

Although people often look to you for answers, specific issues are usually best resolved by the individuals themselves. The real gains are made when the team becomes conflict-competent, learning to catch potentially destructive conflict early and manage it informally. One way to do this is to develop a team conflict charter, where the team works together to decide how they will recognize and deal with future conflict. Your role as a leader can be to facilitate this, or to ask for support from another team member or a conflict professional.

Help the organization learn

Whether you are a leader of a group of frontline workers, a management team, or you sit within the c-suite, your role is crucial in helping the organization learn to be conflict- resilient. This could be by identifying individual or organizational development needs, implementing learning strategies, or demonstrating constructive conflict skills that inspire others to do the same.

This brings us to one of a leader's opportunities: to imagine the organization's future and take steps to make it happen. This means to visualize the compound effect of cascading skills through the organization, to envision a workforce of enabled individuals with conflict communication skills, who take accountability for issues, and work them through together. With this foundation, leaders can spend less time and resources dealing with crises, and more time leading their organizations to future success.