

## **Conflict Management in Organizations**

### Principles For Successful Organizations

Unfortunately, no one management theory appears to answer all the questions or circumstances an organization faces.

However, there are factors that appear to be common to successful organizations which we cannot ignore if success is to be achieved. These include:

- conflict must be managed
- people must be valued
- purpose and vision must be clear
- persistence must exist
- expectations must be set
- consequences must exist
- consistency must exist
- commitment must exist
- patience must be practiced
- simplicity must prevail

The purpose of this article is to examine the first of these factors: **conflict management**.

### **Conflict Must Be Managed**

So soon as the word "conflict" is mentioned, people stiffen up, expecting a negative experience. Conflict means strife, turmoil, disagreement. Many organizations and people go to great lengths to avoid conflict, or to resolve conflict only once it emerges.

We agree that conflict needs to be resolved. But we don't agree that conflict should be avoided. In fact, conflict represents one of the best tools available to management.

### **The Cause of Conflict**

Conflict between groups and individuals occurs when parties are seeking a particular end, and their preference appears to be blocked by the other party or some factor, or where no ready solution appears available. Conflict is simply frustration with not being able to get to where you want to go.

Conflict exists where no single answer exists. It can be between people or groups, or within a single person or group. That is, we can have conflict within ourselves as to what the right course of action might be.

### **Why Conflict is Valuable**

From conflict, tremendous strengths emerge: ideas that might not have otherwise been considered; solutions that were impossible before the conflict; and, an improved understanding

by each of the parties of the other's interests and issues. Conflict stimulates discovery, challenges assumptions, and creates options.

### **Conflict and Change**

Conflict inevitably occurs in situations of change - a certain sector of any group will likely oppose change if for no other reason than a lack of understanding or a sense of comfort in doing things the old way. Resistance will show up as conflict. Learning how to manage the conflict that is generated is essential to effecting meaningful change.

### **Destructive Conflict**

Conflict can be destructive and induce ineffectiveness when it is left unresolved as underlying problems are not addressed. It can also be destructive when one party overpowers another or uses conflict as a weapon of personal hurt.

### **Constructive Conflict**

Conflict needs to be actively managed by the leadership of an organization. Conflict needs to be seen as a positive tool for creating ideas; as an inevitable element in change; and, as an indication of underlying problems that need to be addressed.

Conflict is managed through a process akin to interest based negotiation, sometimes assisted by third parties.

Parties identify: a common purpose behind the conflict (why are we involved); the issues that each party feels; and, the interests that each party holds. Understanding issues and identifying interests, the parties define common interests, from which base they will be able to consider new ways of resolving the conflict. In the end, both parties will be committed to and understand the solution.

Leaders must strive to manage conflict: stimulating change; resolving conflict to effect change. Regardless of which management theory is chosen for an organization to operate under, effective conflict management is essential to a successful organization.