

## **WORKPLACE CONFLICT:**

# **THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY**

**By Moira Jenkins**

Disagreements and conflict are inevitable in any workplace. However, conflict does not have to be an unhealthy feature in an organization. To progress, excel and develop, your organization may benefit from some healthy conflict. Indeed the absence of conflict can indicate apathy or a fear of questioning established or entrenched working practices. A workplace without conflicts can easily become stagnant and stuck in a rut.

However, while healthy conflicts can be beneficial, unhealthy conflicts can be just the opposite. Studies have shown that unhealthy conflict in organisations can contribute to sickness absenteeism and poor mental health in workers. When conflicts get UGLY then they result in legal or industrial issues and can be very costly for the organization and the staff involved. The question is, how do we tell the difference between the 'Good', the 'Bad' and the 'Ugly', and as a manager how can you encourage the 'good' conflicts, nip the 'bad' conflicts in the bud, and prevent the 'ugly' conflicts from even occurring?

## **THE GOOD**

Healthy conflict encourages staff to justify where they are coming from, and promote greater understanding of the issues being discussed. It is important to encourage staff to air differences and openly letting your staff know that different opinions and ideas are valued, is a good way to promote healthy discussion and debate. Establish meeting norms to encourage a culture where employees feel safe in suggesting new ideas or asserting their position. Norms such as no swearing, no interruptions, no personal attacks will help set the scene for some healthy debate and exchange of ideas. Make sure that the less assertive people in your organisation are given the time and encouragement to speak. You never know what ideas they may have been hiding. Make sure there is a time limit on the more vocal employees speaking so they don't hog the debate. Never underestimate the power of asking why employees think their

idea or opinion is worthwhile. Explaining to staff why decisions are made, and encouraging staff to ask you *why* you have come to a certain conclusion can open up the communication. Be wary of quick acceptance of a suggested solution or ideas well as little sharing of information. These are all signs that employees are avoiding conflict, and you will find that people 'tune out' and the unresolved issues keep emerging in the same or different form. These unresolved matters, if not aired can develop into what I have called 'bad' conflicts. Ask at team meeting for two way feedback and how communication can be improved. As a manager model active listening skills such as paraphrasing or summarizing in order to reflect back ideas and feelings. That way your staff will know that you have heard them and they will feel understood.

### **THE BAD**

Conflict is not always healthy, and there are several signs that suggest destructive conflict is setting in. Are staff meetings silent? Is one (or several staff members) sitting arms crossed, not actively participating? Are there staff members who are not speaking to each other? Are there patterns of unusual sick leave being taken by employees who are not usually sick? Can you feel the tension? Have you witnessed or heard of inappropriate behaviours occurring? These are all signs of unhealthy conflict brewing and NEEDS TO BE ADRESSED. I remember when I was working at the South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission; someone had lodged a complainant of sexual harassment against a fellow employee. When they approached their manager about the behaviour and the ongoing conflict, their manager apparently said "you two sort it out, or one of you will have to go". That complaint went from bad to ugly very quickly.

When you have staff in conflict, it is important to focus on the behaviour, not the person or the labels. It is also important to nip these conflicts in the bud as soon as possible, or they have the potential to escalate in to 'ugly' conflicts.

Communication problems are an important source of conflict. Some workers may be very task orientated and not so focused on the relationship. Others may have a greater emphasis on relationship and spend more time building relationships and making sure all parties are comfortable with decisions. As a result both staff members they may

interpret the same event quite differently, and be frustrated with each others communication styles. It is important that they are given the space and structure to discuss the issues and look at how they are going to move forward.

This can start with a meeting designed to let the parties air their differences, discuss the underlying issues and look for a resolution without focusing on blame and culpability. Acting as an intermediary, the manager can set an agenda where both parties are able to explain their side of the story and also hear the others perspective. Ground rules regarding behaviours need to be set and it is a good idea to let the parties set these them selves so they feel as though they are having input into how the meeting is run.

As the referee the manager might have to have final say if the conflict is about issues that are against the law or company policy. He or she might have to tell one party that their behaviour is not acceptable. However, once this is out on the table, the parties can address future behaviours and discuss how they are going to interact in the future.

It is important that managers document that they have met with the parties, document what was agreed on, and follow up with both parties to check whether the conflict is truly resolved. Nipping these conflicts ‘in the bud’ also ensures that a good working relationship between the parties is possible. The no blame focus means that the parties can concentrate on seeking a resolution rather than focusing on culpability and retribution.

If the conflict is entrenched or complex, sometimes external mediators who are professionally trained in conflict resolution are more able to facilitate a positive resolution. LEADR –Association of Dispute Resolvers [www.leadr.com.au](http://www.leadr.com.au) is a professional body that can provide information on mediators and workplace dispute resolution. Even if external mediators are bought in to assist with resolving the conflict, the manager still needs to follow up with both parties to check that the issues raised are truly resolved. He or she needs to document that they have followed up, and also document the responses of the parties.

## **THE UGLY**

The ugly sorts of conflicts are those that trigger a media and / or a legal response. These are conflicts such as bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination or industrial conflicts. One of the problems with the ugly conflicts is that even the alleged behaviours didn't occur, the organisation still suffers. There are no winners (except maybe the lawyers). These ugly conflicts have a financial cost in terms of legal fees, increased staff turn over, difficulty recruiting, increased absenteeism, workers compensation stress claims, as well as damaging the organisation's reputation. These sorts of conflicts are usually characterised by entrenched positions and attempts to defeat the other party.

Because of the potential of 'bad' conflicts escalating into 'ugly' conflicts all inappropriate behaviour needs to be addressed by management. The bottom line is that managers are accountable, and they can't afford to put 'bad' conflicts on the backburner. The number one rule is don't wait for a formal or written complaint. If a manager hears of, witnesses or is made aware of informally of potential inappropriate behaviour they have a duty of care, and a legal obligation to follow it up and prevent or stop the behaviour. Once again my advice is to document any intervention and Follow up, Follow up and Follow up. In order to prevent these 'ugly' conflicts occurring there also needs to be clear policies around behavioural expectations, and these policies need to be understood by all staff. There also needs to be guidelines for staff on what to do if they feel they are being treated inappropriately and where they can go to for help in resolving the conflict.

Conflict never has to reach the 'ugly' stage. An organisation that both encourages healthy debate and nips inappropriate behaviours in the bud goes a long way to nurturing a culture of growth and respect amongst its employees.

### **The 10 rules of conflict management**

1. Embrace positive conflict and encourage staff to air their differences
2. Don't underestimate the power of asking *why*?
3. Use *active listening skills* so that employees will feel that their side of the discussion has been understood
4. Be on the lookout for signs of unhealthy conflict
5. Focus on the behaviour not the label
6. Nip 'bad' conflicts in the bud before they turn 'ugly'
7. Remember, managers are accountable.
8. Get help if you are over your head
9. Document
10. Follow up, Follow up and Follow up.

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