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**CONFLICT AND STRESS MANAGEMENT IN
ORGANISATIONS**

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CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

The work force of today is composed of people who are more diverse than ever in nationality, culture, religion, age, education and socio-economic status. These people enter the work force with differing backgrounds, values, goals and perceptions of acceptable behaviour. Furthermore, many of them have unrealistic job expectations. This diverse, multicultural population of workers is expected to work together in a spirit of cooperation and respect for the good of the organisation and the public they serve.

On the job, employees are often faced with decisions that have implications for their job security, their salaries and the success of their employers — decisions that bring pressures to bear on them to protect their own interests, sometimes at the risk of losing their personal and corporate integrity. "There's more pressure on people in organisations than there ever has been to do more with less and adjust quickly to changes. In response to that pressure, people may cut corners... may engage in expedient but questionable behaviour" (Kirrane, 1990, p. 55).

Issues facing organisations vary from downsizing, employee rights, gender and ethnic discrimination to product safety, waste disposal, pollution control and questioning of their moral responsibility for the allocation and depletion of scarce resources. These issues are complex, creating difficult ethical dilemmas. Because of the complexity of such ethical dilemmas, "corporations are rushing to adopt codes of ethics. Business schools are scrambling to add ethics course. And hundreds of consultants are being hired to put 'integrity' into corporate cultures" (Byrne, 1988, p. 56). The modern breed of corporate citizens need to be especially equipped with the motivation to face these complex issues and more crucially with the skills to handle conflicts and negotiate for resolution in the workplace as a result of the crisis in expectation and ethics.

Discussion, analysis, problem solving and decision making are critical to the fair resolution of conflicts. To start with, most conflicts can be said to be one of four general types:

- (a) the conflict within oneself which relates to different personal values;
- (b) the conflict between personal values and the values held by another person or the organisation;

- (c) the conflict between basic principles and the need to achieve a desired outcome; and
- (d) the conflict between two or more individuals or groups with whom one has an obligation (Kirrane, 1990).

What is then needed in order to have a role to play in resolving any of these classes of conflict or to avoid conflict? Clearly a considerable amount of interpersonal and negotiation skills is needed and, as Lankard (1987) would have it, preferably coupled with honesty, ability to work cooperatively, respect for others, pride in one's work, willingness to learn, dependability, responsibility for one's actions, integrity and loyalty. These are not common and apparent virtues and there is thus a great need to train employees in ethics, critical thinking, and conflict avoidance and resolution. Conflict avoidance and resolution begins with recognising the symptoms and causes of conflicts.

2. THE BEGINNING OF CONFLICT

Generally conflict begins when there is a breakdown of communication that leads to suspicion and misunderstanding. Conflict can also start when there is a lack of openness which is the desire to communicate honestly what needs to be said at the time. Such situations often result from a weak leadership, dissatisfaction with the management style and provocative ambitious drives among employees. In other words, conflict results from clashing personalities and conscious behaviour

In his book "In Over Our Heads", Kegan (1994) identified five distinct stages of consciousness ("personalities") and how the thought process within each stage handle conflict. He divided people at stage 1, 2 and 3 as "Traditionalists", people at stage 4 as "Moderns" and the people at stage 5 as "Post-moderns."

Stage 1. Magical Thinking: Individuals in this stage lack good cause-and-effect thinking and often attribute events in their lives to metaphysical causes. They often act impulsively and engage in fantasy projections. In conflict situations, they typically blame their conflicts or problems on some unforeseen coincidence or on the other person without any awareness of how they might have participated in causing the conflict.

Stage 2. Concrete Thinking: Individuals in this stage base their reality on what is visible and concrete. They are unable to grasp the meaning of abstract concepts such as "fairness". Everything must be quantified in concrete, visible ways for them to grasp its meaning. In conflict, they only focus on the most visible and obvious effects of the conflict.

Stage 3. Cross-Relational Thinking: Individuals in this stage think abstractly. While they are able to see the relationships between categories of information, they tend to see the world as acting upon them. They typically think, act and

feel like a victim. In conflict, they feel victimized by others or the situation and believe the problem is caused by other people or circumstances.

Stage 4. Systemic Thinking: Individuals in this stage think holistically and systematically. They are able to perceive the underlying patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that recycle and control their lives. In conflict, they are able to correlate a current conflict with similar ones from the past. They can understand how and why a current conflict might be caused by an unresolved conflict from the past, but they usually cannot figure out what to do to change this pattern or conflict.

Stage 5. Trans-Systemic Thinking: Individuals in this stage can see the relationships between their current conflict and their past unresolved conflicts and also change these life-restricting patterns. They can utilize conflict situations as opportunities to change their lives and their relationships.

Conflict, for example the strong disagreement between two or more individuals seeking to promote their own individual self-interest or views definitely occurs everyday in any organisation but it need not be inherently bad. Some conflicts, handled effectively, can be beneficial and constructive if the consequences and outcome are more effective communication, better understanding, a clearer view of a problem, a good solution to a problem and firmer cooperation amongst employees. It is destructive and disruptive when it distracts from important activities and work, undermines morale at the workplace, polarizes people and groups, reduces cooperation, increases or sharpens differences, and leads to irresponsible, physically and verbally abusive behaviour.

3. STRATEGIES USED IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict together with stress are the two most frequent complaints that give rise to discontentment, rivalry, poor health, absenteeism, inefficiency and low productivity in organisations. Clearly, management of conflict and stress should occupy a high priority in any organisation. It has been shown that unmanaged conflict can lead to violence and insubordination. A recent study in United States showed that 42% of a manager's time is spent on reaching agreement with others when conflict occur (Watson & Hoffman, 1996).

The general consensus of opinion among conflict managers is that the four basic principles for a corporate conflict management system are:

- (a) Conflict prevention is the first goal (prophylaxis).
- (b) When conflicts do happen, they should be resolved as quickly as possible. The longer they remain unresolved, the more drain they put on performance.
- (c) Conflicts are best addressed as directly as possible with those who are involved.
- (d) Conflicts should be dealt with using informal dialogue between the parties or in mediation.

When a conflict cannot be prevented and has occurred, then negotiation and conflict management should attempt to achieve the "win-win" situation. Key steps towards a win-win settlement include psychological and strategic preparation and planning. These include:

- (a) Orienting oneself towards a win-win approach.
- (b) Planning a concrete strategy which involves being clear on what is important and why it is important.
- (c) Knowing possible BATNAs (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Alternative).
- (d) Separating people from the problem (address the problem).
- (e) Focussing on interests, not positions by considering the other party's situation.
- (f) Creating or being receptive to options for mutual gain.
- (g) Aiming for an outcome based on some objective goal.
- (h) Paying attention to the course of the negotiation.
- (i) Considering the intangibles and communicating carefully.
- (j) Using listening skills, careful choice of words and questions.

When attempting a resolution of a conflict, it is important to have a BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) or the course of action one would take if an agreement is not reached. A BATNA establishes the bottomline for a settlement. In the planning process it is important to establish one's own BATNA and to be aware of the other party's BATNA. Skilled negotiators will try to convince the other party that their BATNA are unattainable and really are not as good as what that party had perceived them to be.

It is critical to address the problem, not attack an opponent personally. It is important to maintain a rational, goal-oriented frame of mind. One should not get hooked into an emotional reaction but one should try to understand the root of the problem.

Another critical key in negotiation is an attempt to reach an understanding of the other party's underlying interests and underlying needs. Careful probing and questioning should reveal common or parallel interests and needs, and thus close the gap on the differences. Understanding these interests is the key to "integrative bargaining" that can lead to a win-win situation.

In any negotiation, the decision must be based on a common goal or objective standard. Such a negotiated decision must be derived from principles and objective criteria, not emotions or pressure.

It is important to pay attention to the course of negotiation. Negotiation is a sequence of events, not the single indivisible incident that it is commonly thought of. It is probably more useful to think about conflict first as a process or a complex series of events over time involving both external factors and internal social and psychological

factors. A negotiation therefore usually involves a number of steps including the exchange of ideas and thoughts that mirrors the course and causes of the conflict. The goal remains as a search for the common definition of the problem and the formulation of strategies to resolve this conflict.

The agreement technique may also be used. In the agreement technique, a coach or arbitrator meets with each party separately to provide support and gain insight into the situation. The coach seeks written agreements as to what each person will do and obtains their commitments. Contacts continue to ensure that the terms of agreement remain acceptable and beneficial to both parties.

4. SPECIFIC CONFLICTS AND THEIR RESOLUTIONS

Conflicts can occur in interpersonal one-on-one relationships, in meetings, and in negotiations. Although there are similarities between all of these areas, there are significant differences in the setting in which the conflict occurs. Management of these conflicts depends very much upon the differences.

Conflict in interpersonal relationships: In any organisation, employees interact daily. Conflict may arise without warning. If someone who is normally friendly and familiar toward you suddenly begins avoiding you, is rude or turns cold, there has to be a reason. If someone remains normal and cheerful with other colleagues except with you, the chances are that you have a conflict at hand. Below are some recommendations to deal with this conflict:

- (a) Determine if there is a problem between you and the other person.
- (b) If there is a problem, set up a private face-to-face meeting to discuss the problem with the other person.
- (c) In a non-confrontational manner, ask the person if there is a problem. If the other person denies there is a problem, you need to inform the person that you think there is a problem and explain what you think the problem is.
- (d) As you talk, ask for feedback. Avoid confronting the other person with accusations.
- (e) Ensure that both of you listen to each other with open minds.
- (f) Be sure to respect each other's opinions.
- (g) Take a few minutes to re-evaluate the other person's opinions in your mind.
- (h) Try to determine why the other person felt the way he/she did.
- (i) Avoid "finger-pointing."
- (j) Try to work out a compromise that pleases both of you.

Conflicts in meeting: Conflicts in meetings can be helpful if it is viewed as disagreements. If the person disagrees with you and is raising valid questions, it may benefit the group to address the issues presented. By listening to the person, you may gain valuable insight into what is and what is not working within your organisation. But when the person

continues past the point of disagreement to the point of disruptiveness, specific steps should be taken.

- (a) Find some "grain of truth" in the other person's position that you can build upon.
- (b) Identify areas of agreement in the two positions.
- (c) Document the subject and set it aside for discussion as the last agenda or in the next meeting.
- (d) Ask to speak with the individual after the meeting or during a break.
- (e) See if someone else in the meeting has a response or recommendation.
- (f) Present your view, but do not force agreement.
- (g) Agree that the person has a valid point and that there may be some way to make the situation work for both parties.
- (h) Create a compromise.

Conflict in negotiations: When you are negotiating with your clients, vendor or even your employees, it is important to always keep in mind the idea that both parties are seeking a win-win situation. No one wants to feel like they are giving away something for nothing. Conflicts arise because one party feels that the other party has taken advantage of them. To avoid these situations, successful negotiations follow these principles:

- (a) Avoid defend-attack interaction.
- (b) Seek more information by asking relevant questions.
- (c) Check understanding and sum up often to make make sure you understand everything.
- (d) Try to understand the other person's point of view since communication is more than just listening.

Regardless of the types of conflict that you find yourself in, follow these rules of thumb to defuse any volatile situation. Be assertive but not aggressive. Reflect your understanding of the other's position or opinion by saying "I feel/ think...you want....." and then "I am listening to your opinion and I take your opinion into account before I state mine." Let the other person know that you value him/her as a person even though his/her opinion is different from yours by saying "I understand/respect/appreciate...how you feel...", and state your position or opinion by saying "I value you and your views, but I don't agree....."

Intangible elements in negotiation and conflict management such as verbal and non-verbal ("body language") communication, personality, physical space, time pressure and past experience are important. To ensure a successful negotiation, one needs to play effectively these intangible cards.

STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress, the “wear and tear” our bodies experiences as we adjust to the continuing changes in our organisation, can be classed as survival stress, internally generated stress, environmental and job stress, and fatigue and overwork.

Survival stress occurs in cases where your survival or health is threatened, for example when you are put under pressure, or when you experience some unpleasant or challenging event. Internally generated stress come from anxious worrying about events beyond your control, from a tense, hurried approach to life, or from relationship problems caused by your own behaviour. Environmental and job stress arise from the noise, crowding, pollution, untidiness, dirt, high expectations, unfriendly and unsafe environment. Fatigue and overwork occur when you try to achieve too much in too little time or where you are not using effective time management strategies.

Stress can create positive or negative reactions in us. As a positive influence, stress can help propel us into productive action. Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement in life (“exhilaraton”), and we all certainly thrive under a certain amount of stress. It also helps us to concentrate, focus and perform, and can often help us to reach peak efficiency. Such mechanisms clearly work well among successful athletes in extreme and dangerous sports.

Stress as a negative influence can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, depression that lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. Negative stress causes emotional reactions (e.g. fear and anxiety) that are reflected in biochemical changes within our body which cause physical ailments ranging from tension headaches to heart attacks.

2. SYMPTOMS OF STRESS AND ITS EFFECTS

Markers and signs for stress may be distributed into five distinct sets (Table 1 – 5). The preliminary stress assessment consists of measuring the number and concentration of these markers which a respondent has selected from the five sets.

TABLE 1: PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

- ☛ Headaches
- ☛ Back pain
- ☛ Muscle tension
- ☛ Chest pain
- ☛ Abdominal pain
- ☛ Stomach ache or upset
- ☛ Dry mouth or sore throat
- ☛ Grinding teeth
- ☛ Shortness of breath
- ☛ Heartburn
- ☛ Skin rashes
- ☛ Fever
- ☛ Diarrhea
- ☛ Constipation

TABLE 2: EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

- ☛ Fearful
- ☛ Panic
- ☛ Anxiety
- ☛ Hopeless
- ☛ Crying easily
- ☛ Depressed
- ☛ Fatigue
- ☛ Emotionally drained
- ☛ Apathetic – nothing seems important
- ☛ Keyed-up feeling

TABLE 3: MENTAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

- ☛ Inattentiveness
- ☛ Forgetfulness
- ☛ Poor concentration
- ☛ Mind going blank
- ☛ Cannot turn off certain thoughts
- ☛ Worrying

TABLE 4: BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

- ☛ Loss of appetite
- ☛ Overeating
- ☛ Smoking
- ☛ Drinking alcoholic beverages
- ☛ Taking tranquilizers
- ☛ Taking aspirin and other pain relievers
- ☛ Taking other drugs
- ☛ Withdrawing from close relationship
- ☛ Watching TV (over 3 hours a day)
- ☛ Resent people
- ☛ Don't feel like doing anything / working
- ☛ Accidents or injuries

TABLE 5: ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

- ☛ Job burnout
- ☛ Low morale
- ☛ Absenteeism
- ☛ Poor performance
- ☛ High turnover
- ☛ Job dissatisfaction
- ☛ High use of health facilities
- ☛ Industrial accidents
- ☛ Poor working relationship

3. STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress management is about the acquisition of self-coping skills, communication skills, exercise, relaxation techniques, anger management, time management, nutrition, a support system and an environment that ultimately promote the ability to confine the levels of stimulation to those that are healthy and enjoyable. Examples of some of these tools for stress management are:

Self-coping skills: Whenever you feel overwhelmed by stress, practice speaking more slowly than usual. You'll find that you think more clearly and react more reasonably to stressful situations.

Communication skills: Be assertive. **Assertiveness** is when you **STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS** in such a way that the **RIGHTS OF OTHERS ARE NOT VIOLATED**. Beyond just demanding your rights, you can express your personal likes and interests spontaneously, or you can talk about yourself without being self-conscious, and you can accept compliments comfortably, disagree with someone openly, or ask for clarification, and

finally you can say no. In short, when you are an assertive person, you can remain respectful in inter-personal situations.

Exercise: Exercise is one of the best remedies for stress. When you exercise, you produce morphine-like substances called endorphins that are natural pain relievers and induce feelings of well-being and relaxation. Toning, stretching, walking, running, aerobics are the various forms of exercise.

Relaxation techniques: Diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing, progressive relaxation, visualization and meditation are effective techniques for relaxing. Always plan something rewarding such as relaxing bath, reading a good book, watching television and listening to music at the end of a stressful day. Some people find singing, repetitive activity (knitting, crochet, pottery making), gardening, playing with pets and/or gazing at the stars relaxing.

Anger management: Watch for the next instance in which you find yourself becoming annoyed or angry at something trivial or unimportant, then practice letting go – make a conscious choice not to become angry or upset. Effective anger management is a stress reducer.

Time management: If you find yourself rushing and needing more than 24 hours in a day, you are stressed. Here are some tips to help you squeeze a few more precious minutes out of your day.

- (a) Don't waste waiting time. For the inevitable times when you must wait, find ways to put even a few minutes' waiting time to good use.
- (b) Capitalize on your body rhythms. If you know when you're at your peak mentally and physically, schedule the most demanding tasks for these periods.
- (c) In the workplace, cultivate a friendly but businesslike personality while at your desk. Remain polite but unwelcoming to those who want to interrupt while you're busy. Being always available to unannounced visitors or coworkers eager for a chat can eat up a major portion of your day. Limit socializing to areas away from your workspace, so you're projecting a consistent message.
- (d) If you need to schedule meetings or appointments that have the potential to drag on indefinitely, try scheduling them right before lunch or near the end of the business day.

Nutrition: A healthy body responds better to the inevitable stresses of life, and good nutrition is essential for good health. Good habits include restricting fats to unsaturated and polyunsaturated, taking a multivitamin tablet daily, reducing sugar and salt intake, and including high fibre food such as cereals, fruits, vegetables and grains. Weight watching is sensible and some useful tips are:

- eat slowly;
- concentrate on eating;
- eat regularly;
- control portion size (eg half a cup);
- when you're bored... get involved in activities;
- when you are angry... jog, gardening, chew sugarless gum or carrot;
- when you are tired... take a hot bath, go to bed;
- when you are anxious... engage in physical activities, go to a movie; and
- avoid coffee, tea, chocolate, colas as they are high in stimulants, which make some people feel irritable and nervous.

Drinking plenty of water and eating small nutritious snacks are excellent habits as well.

Support System: A stress support system acts both as an avenue for people to talk about their stress, seek advice and treatment, and as a resource centre that can conduct stress awareness programmes and events which are specific to the particular work place or organisation. Here are some do's and don'ts for starting a support group.

- (a) Do decide on the format of the group – discussion presentation, or address specific problem.
- (b) Do limit the size of the group.
- (c) Do agree upon leadership.
- (d) Do agree in advance whether to meet weekly, bi-weekly or monthly, and adhere to it.
- (e) Do make a contract at the beginning of the group concerning the number of times the group will meet.
- (f) Do remember that this should be a rewarding experience and not just another slot on your calendar.
- (g) Don't build a group of coworkers from one office or work environment.
- (h) Don't go over the time limit.

The Environment: Life is stressful enough without allowing the physical environment to intensify our day-to-day stress. Some steps to take to eliminate environmental stressors include:

- (a) Try to carry out some of your daily activities in natural light. Prolonged exposure to artificial lighting can be a subtle, often unrecognized stressor.
- (b) Have adequate ventilation or air filters in the areas where you spend most time.
- (c) Regulate air humidity to a level that's comfortable for you. Humidifiers can make our dry air-conditioned room more livable.
- (d) De-clutter by removing all unnecessary objects so that the room is visually pleasing and relaxing.
- (e) Reduce background and unwanted noise.
- (f) Ban tobacco smoke and other irritating pollutants.

- (g) Design your computer workstation to reduce the risk of repetitive strain injury, eye strain and back pain.

CONCLUSION

Conflict and stress management techniques do not come naturally to most people. They have to be educated into the mechanisms of how these difficulties arise and be trained and taught on the methods to avoid and cope or reduce conflict and stress. Conflict and stress awareness programmes exist and organisations who value their efficiency should pay more importance in teaching their workers and management the proper techniques for identifying the sources of conflict and stress and avoiding or resolving them if they unfortunately appear in the organisation.

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