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Causes of Conflict

6-7 minutes

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Before attempting to resolve any conflict it is always important to determine exactly what is causing it. Understanding what triggers can cause conflict makes resolution easier to reach and conflict easier to avoid in the first place. There are an infinite number of reasons why conflict can occur in the workplace, however a small number of causes are most common and we have looked at them here.

Bell & Hart's 8 causes of conflict:

Bell (2002) suggested six key reasons for conflict occurring in the workplace and in 2009 Hart added two more. These 8 causes are generally assumed to be the main reasons conflict can occur in an organisation and we have looked at them in more detail below.

1. Conflicting resources

Employees rely on accessing resources, such as technology, office supplies and meeting rooms, to perform effectively. Unfortunately, it is not always possible for everyone to access the resources they wish to at all times. If the reason someone cannot access the resources is that someone else is using them then this can lead to conflict. A manager's job may then be to decide who has the rightful access to the resource and how it will be distributed in the future.

2. Conflicting styles

No two individuals will work the same. Different methods of organisation, communication and time-keeping are very common in any organisation. This is generally effective as each individual should be allowed to work in their own style. However, when it comes to team tasks this can become problematic, as some

individuals will have to compromise on how the work is done. A manager can avoid conflict occurring here by selecting teams based on their similarities and strengths.

3. Conflicting perceptions

Different perceptions of what the organisation's goals are, the methods used and who is responsible for what can often lead to conflict. Open and transparent communication is the key to avoiding this happening.

4. Conflicting goals

Often different managers will set targets and goals for the same individual and this can often lead to conflicting goals being set. For instance, it is hard to deliver on both speed and quality and hence setting both these targets may cause issues. The conflict here may be between the individual and on or both of the managers or between the managers themselves.

5. Conflicting pressures

Conflicting pressures are similar to conflicting goals, except they usually exist over a shorter space of time. Individuals may be pressured to complete two different tasks by two different managers before the end of the day and this can lead to conflict.

6. Conflicting roles

Often employees can be asked to perform a task that they are not usually responsible for. This can cause conflict as either the individual feels the task is not appropriate for them or another individual believed it was for them. Whilst this can be avoided by delegating the same tasks to the same individuals, differentiating your team members' roles can be a good opportunity for learning

and development.

7. Different personal values

Personal values determine the way we behave and the work we produce. Often, individuals will disagree about the actions they should take due to their personal values and this can lead to conflict. As a manager, you can ensure your team members are never put in a position where they are asked to compromise their values. See our Wiki on Ethical Leadership for more information about dealing with situations like this.

8. Unpredictable policies

Rules and policies are not always communicated across an organisation effectively. This can lead to a poor understanding of them and confusion amongst team members. It is important to ensure policies, and particularly their changes, are communicated effectively throughout the organisation to avoid conflict like this from occurring.

The author's do not discuss how to deal with conflict, just how to identify what is causing it. There are various techniques for the next step, which is how to deal with conflict, which are discussed in our Wiki Conflict Management. This tool is useful as a first step to dealing with conflict, as before you can resolve it, it is important to know exactly what is driving it.

What are the main causes of conflict?
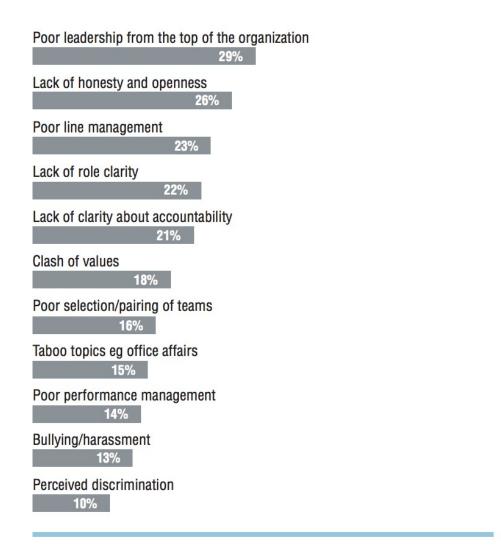
Personality clashes/warring egos
49%

Stress
34%

Heavy workloads/inadequate resources
33%

Poor leadership from the top of the organization
29%

Lack of honesty and openness
26%

Poor line management
23%

Lack of role clarity
22%

Lack of clarity about accountability
21%

Clash of values
18%

Poor selection/pairing of teams
16%

Taboo topics eg office affairs
15%

Poor performance management
14%

Bullying/harassment
13%

Perceived discrimination
10%

In CPP Global's report, 'Workplace conflict and how businesses can harness

it to thrive' (2008), they found the top 10 causes of conflict at work.

Bell, A. 2002. *Six ways to resolve workplace conflicts.* San Francisco, CA: University of San Francisco.

CPP. (2008). *Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness it to Thrive.* CPP Global Human Capital Report. July, 2008

Hart, B. 2009. *Conflict in the workplace*. Behavioural Consultants, P.C. http://www.excelatlife.com/articles/conflict_at_work.htm.

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