



Handling Workplace Conflict During Organizational Change

Experts agree that whether we view change as positive or negative, there is a certain amount of stress that accompanies change. More stress means more conflict. Most people prefer a predictable stable workplace. So, naturally, people fight against change and they fear change because it presents a threat to something they value.

People fear a number of things, among them that they will lose job security or that the change might mean a loss of friends or contacts. They fear their salary may change, and not for the better. They fear they will lose certain freedom, that they may lose (or gain) responsibility, that they may lose (or gain) authority. If working conditions have been good, they fear those conditions will change and they fear that their own pride and satisfaction in the job may decline. These fears may be real or they may be a perception due to misunderstanding what the change will bring or how it will be implemented.

Other reasons people may fear change is lack of trust in the person who is responsible for making or implementing the change. Those who had a negative attitude before the change are likely to grow even more distrustful. People may feel powerless, especially if they see no reason for the change.

So if change is imminent--or if it's already happened and you're the one dealing with it--how can you work through the fears, defenses and stress?

Knock down defense walls that resist change

First, take a look at yourself. How comfortable are you with the change? Are you feeling some resistance? If so, that could be coming across to your co-workers, bosses and employees. It's important that you understand and address your own feelings about the change. Once you've taken a good look at yourself and identified your own feelings about change, you'll be better prepared to deal with it and other's reactions. .

Recognize the difference between constructive and destructive conflict and turn destructive conflict into constructive opportunity.

Constructive conflict moves people toward mutually acceptable goals. Constructive conflict views conflict as opportunity to do things differently and better. Destructive conflict involves moving apart. In destructive conflict, people might be saying the same

things over and over, threats might be made, and tension mounts. Conflict can also be destructive if it is suppressed. Resentments can build and people can explode. Usually conflict becomes destructive when people are not feeling heard and when their needs are ignored.

De-escalate conflict by acknowledging the other person. By letting them give voice to their needs and by actively listening, you will find the other person feeling relief about their anxiety. Transform destructive conflict into opportunity by maintaining a positive focus.

Use a 4-step process for turning conflict into opportunity

Turning conflict into opportunity is a process which can be broken down into steps. The first step is to define the problem while preserving the relationship. This means sharing all pertinent information and being as open and as honest as you can. To preserve relationships, prevent destructive conflict and manage conflict that naturally arises, listen carefully to the concerns that people voice. Don't take objections personally. If the change presents a problem, begin to define what problem it presents. In this way you can work on solutions.

In doing so, you may need to set guidelines and limits. In conflict resolution this is done by allowing each side an uninterrupted period of time in which to speak and if necessary to impose a time limit. After the person has spoken, summarize what you've heard. using empathetic statements wherever possible to acknowledge the feelings.

When all information has been shared and people have had a chance to express their reaction, step two is to discover interests while separating them from positions. At this point, begin to shift the focus from positions which are what people express they want or must have, to interests which are why people want what they want. Find out what lies beneath the surface by asking open-ended questions which dig a little deeper.

The third step is to create options that involve both sides needs. Encourage options that meet both their needs and your own.

Finally, agree on how a solution will be determined. Agreement should not be based on power or pressure. Instead, evaluate whether the agreement is fair and workable based on objective criteria. In this manner, determine which solutions are most realistic and fair.

Conclusion

Change means stress and stress means more conflict. People naturally fight against change, so be prepared if you're proposing change, if your organization is going through change or if you yourself are experiencing change. You will encounter less defensiveness if you actively listen to others, and encourage them to do the same with you. Transform destructive or potentially destructive conflict into constructive

opportunity by maintaining a positive focus and an atmosphere of inclusion in the solution. Step through conflict by sharing all information, actively listening to concerns with empathy, mutually creating options that work for all sides and working out a plan to implement those options.

Finally, some conflicts and resistance may still be beyond your skill and ability to handle. Or you might be too close to the problem to see it objectively. If so, consider using a neutral third party such as a mediator or a facilitator who is not part of the organization. Sometimes someone from the outside can talk to the people involved confidentially and provide a level of safety to surface the real concerns in ways someone in the organization cannot. Above all, maintain a positive focus, and an open mind as you successfully manage conflict during organizational change.