



How Managers Cause Conflict

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This 6-page article addresses how managers can be part of a problem rather than part of a solution. Four specific topics are addressed: culture, future needs, organizational processes, and perceptions.

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How Managers Cause Conflict

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Introduction

The manager plays a key role in the team. Her assumptions about her communication skills and effectiveness influence how she manages. It is assumed that each person promoted to a management positions knows that it is essential to

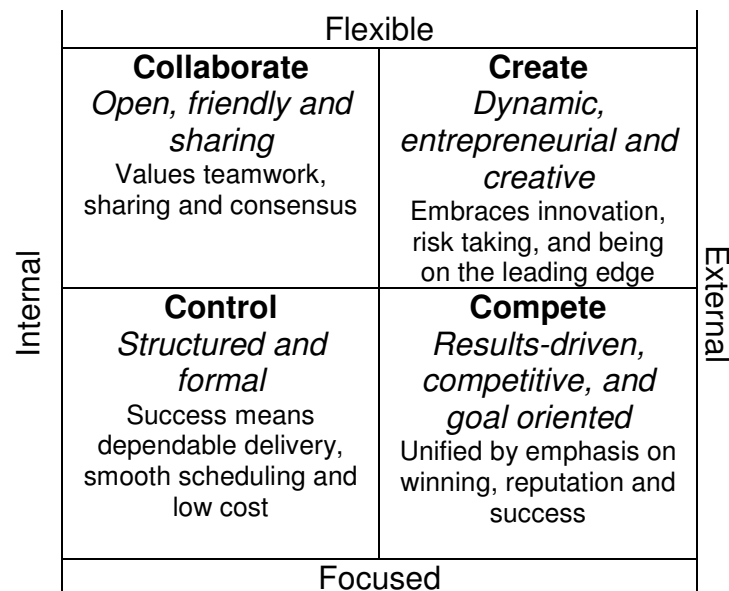
1. ask questions to ensure the receiver's point of view is interpreted accurately
2. be honest
3. ensure that she receives sufficient feedback to ensure the message was interpreted accurately
4. ensure verbal and nonverbal aspects of each communicate are harmonious
5. face the receiver and make motions or vocalizations which indicate she is actively listening
6. have the undivided attention of the person she wants to communicate with and she does so by establishing and maintaining eye contact
7. keep the tone and volume of ones voice in line with the content and intent of the message
8. refrains from interrupting the receiver or answering the telephone
9. say what she means and mean what she says, and
10. think about the content and choose her words carefully.

Are these assumptions accurate? Given the amount of conflict in certain workplaces, it can be assumed that some managers do not possess the communication skills required to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications. It is no wonder given the fact that communication skills are rarely taught and many individuals have not received the mentoring needed to manage other persons.

This article addresses how managers can be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Four specific topics are addressed: culture, future needs, organizational processes, and perceptions.

Culture

There are many definitions of organizational culture. The [Hawthorne Center](#) states that it is made up of its members' shared values, beliefs, symbols and behaviour which guides individual decisions and actions at the unconscious level. They offer a [diagram](#) which is very helpful when assessing one's own culture.



As one manager stated in a session, “I don’t have staff meetings because staff want to have a say in decisions and that can’t happen.” In this case, it can be assumed that the manager is operating from a ‘control’ philosophy and the staff wants to operate from a ‘collaborate’ philosophy.

In this case, is there any wonder that sick-time levels are high, injury rates are above average and employees do not feel they are part of a team? They do not think there is a team. There is a manager and the workers. The hierarchy is clear and the workers do not feel their interests and opinions count. They are told where to work and what to do and their gifts and abilities are not considered or appreciated.

They do not feel a commitment to their organization. They feel undervalued and the joy of work is missing.

Necessary changes

In situations such as the one described above there is a mismatch between the beliefs of the personnel and the style of the manager. The manager is creating conflict. This can change if the manager is willing to:

1. conduct regular staff meetings and explain the issues and challenges faced in the work environment
2. have an open door policy which really means "You are always welcome"
3. listen to the concerns of the staff without making sarcastic comments or telling them they really do not understand
4. engage the personnel in problem solving exercises
5. say thank you for a job well-done
6. hear how her style is a mismatch for the team and make adjustments accordingly. and
7. use a mediator when her attempts to solve conflict does not work.

Future Needs

It is easy for managers to become consumed by the pressing everyday problems which arise within the organization. Human error, changing technologies, increasing demands, labour relations issues, and organizational threats are realities with which the manager must cope. At the same time, managers are expected to keep their eyes on the future.

The future is affected by many factors including: changing requirements, mergers and acquisitions, new players who have different expectations, new competitors, public expectations, and monetary realities. Managers communicate with clients/customers, executives, boards, partners, and governments to determine the real and perceived risks to their operations. When managers are not proactive and unwilling to accept changes which are on the horizon, they can find themselves in conflict with their staff. They can also find themselves in conflict with their executives or boards when they do not agree with the directions which are being required of them and their operations.

Necessary changes

To avoid conflict and minimize risks it is vital for the manager to

- deal with issues immediately and proactively
- pay attention to human relations
- understand that new innovations are going to be the new reality
- keep her eyes on the present and the future
- understand new standards and requirements
- accept processes which will improve efficiencies
- view mergers as positive
- understand how competitors are gaining the edge
- talk to key stakeholder or customers
- ensure staff know what changes could happen in the future and determine what supports they would need to cope with those changes
- deal with personal negative thoughts and emotions, and
- give staff time to vent.

Organizational Processes

Rarely would a business or organizational process be perfect. Managers may be dependent on the compliance of their own staff and other managers to fulfill their mandate effectively and efficiently. When things do not go well it is easy to look for someone to blame. Blaming creates conflict and it can present in many ways;

- we versus they dialogue
- acting as if there is an in-group and an out-group
- letting other know that I/we are right and you/they are wrong
- non-verbal and verbal behaviours which let others know they are not accepted, and
- engaging in groupthink.

When a manager feels threatened, she can find herself in the middle of a conflict and it takes time and energy to step back and evaluate the situation.

Necessary changes

If conflicts are arising or full blown it is incumbent upon the manager to

- question the validity of the story she is playing in her head
- open an honest dialogue with the other party
- assess all risks openly
- choose inclusive behaviours
- compromise where and when possible, and
- be willing to change ideas based on reliable information.

Processes will change therefore, it is critical for the manager to maintain a positive perspective.

Positive Perceptions

With ever increasing demands, it is possible to lose touch with key stakeholders.

Managers can begin to assume that they know what others are thinking and make decisions based on those judgements. When managers communicate based on their assumptions they can find themselves in conflict with their staff, their clients/customers, and their other stakeholders.

These theories about other's intents, reasons behind their behaviours, or their thoughts about a particular situation may be flawed. These flaws can have drastic negative consequence which can affect the manager's ability to fulfill her role in the near and distant future.

Necessary changes

The manager can ensure positive perceptions by

- choosing to openly communicate with the relevant parties
- viewing situations from the others perspectives prior to making any judgements
- keeping communication channels open
- finding a way to find actual opinions and perceptions
- using reliable data to assess risks and make decisions, and
- constantly improving programs, products and services.

It is not always easy to remain positive. However, how a manager deals with her own negative reactions can seriously affect an organization. Remaining positive during the work day within the organization, when networking, and dealing with partners is essential.

Final Comment

Work can be exhausting. Knowing this, it is imperative for managers to assess their own managerial style and make adjustments based on the demands of their own organization and situation. The manager's beliefs, perceptions and approach can either positively or negatively affect the culture within her section of the organization.

The manager is in a key position to ascertain the future needs and demands. She can either proactively plan or put her head in the sand until she is forced to change practices. She has control over her own behaviour and can ensure she sees the big picture, assesses risks and makes the most of every challenge.

She has to use excellent communication skills, minimize or eliminate conflict, be a positive force, and keep the team moving in a constructive direction. In short, she is the listener, the problem solver, the predictor, the analyzer, and the leader.