CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE WORKPLACE

Basic Premise: Conflicts in the workplace arise when individuals have diverse goals, perceptions, styles, values, genders, ethnicity or methods. Yet a workplace of such diversity spawns richness and creativity. Therefore, a workplace with conflicts is a healthy workplace if, and only if conflicts are resolved in a healthy and consistent manner.

Overview of conflict resolution: Conflict is disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas or interests. (American Heritage) Conflict resolution can be defined as a positive process whereby individuals resolve issues in an informal or formal atmosphere, or where issues are resolved as part of the ongoing interaction between individuals. * A fundamental ground rule is to begin this process after forethought is given to such questions as: a) What am I after?, b) How did this get started? [be specific]; c) How am I willing to change in order to reach resolution; d) Why is this a conflict for me?; e) Am I prepared to truly listen? [Or am I too angry at this point?]!; f) Am I the only one who feels this conflict?; g) Am I part of the problem? In short, preparing to enter into either a formal or informal process of resolution, honestly preparing oneself to intellectually (not only emotionally) understand the issue and its various parts is essential. In answering the questions above, try to arrive at a few short declarative statements devoid of pejorative language (“Well to begin with, he is a twit who belongs in a group home!”).

Conflict resolution is a journey to find common ground. It also is permeated with self-interest (remember motivation?). To arrive at common ground, it is often helpful to explore such questions as: What do I want to get out of this? What are deal breakers for me? With this up front, the process often runs more quickly and smoothly.

Frequently conflicts are not resolved because we let them grow from small hills into mountains that seem unassailable due to an inordinate roiling of emotion about the conflict. Ergo, move to resolution with dispatch when a conflict is in fact there – and I submit that we always know when one is there. Trust your gut. Also, a frequent failing is not to accept responsibility for your own anger: you become angry, no one makes you angry. Effective conflict resolution leads to unity by addressing concerns or issues rather than suppressing them. When they are suppressed, you are spawning disunity in
an environment that professes the merits of diversity (of all kinds) and yet fails to engage in the healthy utilization of its gifts.

**Lessons Learned:**

- I have (with regret) avoided resolving conflicts in the past because I somehow feared that it would cause another – or others – to not like me as much. Remember Colin Powell’s axiom: *Needing to be liked by everyone is a distinct sign of mediocrity.*
- I used to go into a conflict resolution as though I were going to win an argument. Hence, I was too confrontational and listening poorly (I of course **knew** the correct outcome!). I have learned that conflict resolution is an intervention (a generative process) rather than a confrontation (a zero-sum process).
- The use of power has no place in conflict resolution.
- Very often what gets me angry comes from a place in my own world that feels threatened. That is a place that I must carefully examine prior to entering into conflict resolution.
- Keep conflict resolution work focused, not person focused. You are seeking strategic solutions to further work goals, not engaging in therapy to straighten out a misguided individual (Never you, of course!).
- Sarcasm torpedoes conflict resolution. A sense of humor and perspective lifts it up.
- Effective conflict resolution depends **much** more on listening than on speaking (Darn it!).
- Ironically, the very word *conflict* can inadvertently raise the stakes of a conversation higher in an instant. I try to avoid the word and instead begin the (conflict resolution) process with such phrases as “Help me to better understand …” or “Can we talk a bit about ….”
- Timing is very important. Try and be very sensitive to what state of mind the other person may be in. Just because you are prepared does not mean that she/he is. It is sometimes helpful to initially raise the issue and then set a mutually acceptable time to talk about it. (I like doing it over lunch. If there is a problem, throw food at it. You buy!)
- Do not spend endless time playing through the many scenarios that just might occur. Be rested, centered and trust the process.
- It gets easier with practice as you become more confident that neither the world nor you will be torn asunder in the process.
Exercises for self-study:
- Choose a conflict that you may have in the workplace that has been there for some time. Then give some thought to Why haven’t I worked to resolve this conflict? Be ruthless honest with yourself. What does this tell you? How might you overcome your barriers?
- Talk with a colleague who seems to be very good at resolving conflicts at work. Ask for tips, a bit of coaching and perhaps see if that person would sit in on a process that you will initiate with another.
- Try, if you can, to engage someone in the process on a minor conflict so that you can practice where the stakes are low. Did it work? Did it not work? How come? Remember, this process generally involves compromise, so you may not be ecstatic, just a bit relieved.
- What have you learned? What might you share with your awesome DEL-MEM colleagues during our biweekly call?

* The quotes in this piece come from an 18 page article on conflict resolution from University of California at San Diego’s HR division and can be found at [http://www-hr.ucsd.edu/~employeeel/confreso.html](http://www-hr.ucsd.edu/~employeeel/confreso.html) It is rather comprehensive and well done – and, it is in a large font!