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About This Study Guide

This study guide accompanies the video *Conflicts in the Workplace: Sources & Solutions*, and provides the opportunity to:

- take a pre-test that evaluates your “starting point” knowledge of conflict resolution issues.
- understand common sources of workplace conflict, and behaviors that make it destructive.
- grasp the negative consequences of destructive conflict on productivity, morale, teamwork, and other areas of work experience.
- learn easy-to-use techniques that turn conflict into constructive interaction.
- contribute your own insights to interpreting conflict situations.
- consider responses to frequently asked questions on the sources and solutions for workplace conflict.
- take a post-test that evaluates your mastery of concepts and techniques included in the video and this study guide.

I . I N T R O D U C T I O N



Constructive Disagreement vs. Destructive Conflict

“I CAN’T KEEP WORKING LIKE THIS...!”

Conflicts are a part of life. And they can cause stress. But conflicts do not have to be destructive.


In fact, it is natural and even desirable that employees exercise their right to disagree at work. The greatest successes often come about as a direct result of disagreement and discussion followed by agreement and decision making. Such constructive conflicts make for better procedures, products and services.

Conflicts become destructive when anger, jealousy, and other strong emotions turn the focus away from problem solving and toward personal attacks. Destructive conflicts can ruin relationships among workers, interfere with productivity, destroy teamwork, and contribute to employee absenteeism and turnover.

One of the secrets to making sure that conflicts remain constructive is not seeing them as one person proving the other person wrong. Instead, it's important to think about conflicts as working with the other person to communicate, solve the problem, come to an agreement, and maintain the relationship.

This does not mean that all conflicts are based on misunderstandings. At times the issues are clearly understood, but individuals have a difference of opinion.

This also does not mean that the disagreement will necessarily end in compromise. Sometimes you need to hold your ground if you truly believe in your own point of view. But the relationship does not have to suffer in the process.



Now, it is true that this is not always easy. Especially if the other person doesn't want to cooperate. You can't control how others will react when you are dealing with your coworkers or colleagues. But there are skills you can learn that help to keep disagreements constructive and to resolve conflicts in a positive way.

These skills depend on recognizing a conflict in its early stages, avoiding the temptation to respond with negative behaviors, and following up to ensure that the outcome is in the best interest of the individuals involved and of your organization.

Bottom line: There will always be conflict. The secret is learning to manage it successfully. Doing so empowers you to take control of your life—and career.

Preview

Share Your Insights

The video begins with Anita and Brad having a conflict. What is the source of their conflict? Could their disagreement have been resolved constructively? What actions do each of them take that turn this into a destructive conflict?

Preview

II. SOURCES



Making Conflicts Worse

“NOW YOU’RE TRYING TO DO MY JOB...”

There are many sources of conflicts in the workplace. Different ideas or goals. Different values or work habits. Competition for resources or rewards. Conflicting roles or responsibilities. Even just plain personality clashes.

Coworkers can develop resentments over simple things: parking places, loud telephone conversations, or not cleaning the coffee area. Or the issues can be much bigger: power struggles, unfairness, or not carrying your load. Depending on the individuals involved, the conflict can be just as distressing when it's about the small things as when it's about the large.


Sometimes the root cause of the conflict can be fixed. Telephone conversations can be made quieter. Coffee areas can be cleaned up. Coworkers can make an effort to do their share. But at other times, the root cause cannot be made to go away. There are only so many parking places. And personalities can't really be changed all that much.

Whether or not the source of the conflict can be changed, the behaviors and attitudes we all take in response to the conflict ARE under our control. Every one of us can choose whether we want to make the conflict constructive or destructive. We can choose to make it better or make it worse.

FOCUS ON YOURSELF

How do you know whether your attitudes and actions are helping or hurting? This takes some introspection and self-examination. Ask yourself, "How do I naturally deal with frustration and anger? Do I express it or keep it inside? Do I lash out or carry grudges?"

Lashing out intimidates others and makes them want to avoid you. But quietly carrying grudges is just as damaging. Such buried anger takes energy and causes stress. It can even make you physically sick. It almost always hurts you more than it hurts the object of your negative feelings.



This doesn't mean you should overlook or excuse serious wrongs, or allow repeated hurts. What it does mean is that it's better to work it out, let it go and move on.

Controlling your anger also does not mean you are limiting your options. Indeed, it helps you keep your options open. It gives you time to think about a situation and choose how you are going to react. If you've already flown off the handle, that's the option you've chosen and you can't take it back.

So, instead of focusing on revenge or punishing the other person, focus on yourself. Figure out what you need in order to feel satisfied with the outcome. By understanding why you are upset, you can better determine what you need. Then you can take steps to create the results you want.

In this study guide, we'll cover eight constructive techniques that can help you get past the anger and find solutions to the root problems that cause conflicts. But first, let's talk about some of the angry reactions and destructive behaviors that get in the way and consistently make things worse.

DON'T GOSSIP OR DWELL ON IT

In the video, we see that Brad had developed a bad habit. Instead of dealing with Anita directly, he would let off steam behind her back.

Unfortunately, gossiping and dwelling on a problem can make us even more upset. It can solidify our position in our own mind, making it even harder for us to find a middle ground—or even want to.

Sometimes we believe that we will get our way by gathering allies within our workgroup. We hope that the other person will feel the peer pressure and give in, ultimately saying “Fine, have it your way.”

The problem is, this usually backfires. Once word gets out that we are talking behind another's back, it naturally makes the other person angry, too. And hurt. Coworkers feel the pressure to take sides. In the end, everyone is on edge and nothing gets fixed.

And even if the other person doesn't find out, we hurt ourselves. Stewing on the problem uses valuable time when we could be doing more enjoyable things. It makes the problem seem bigger rather than smaller. It can disrupt our sleep. And it can spill over into relationships outside of work with our friends and family. Since they can't do anything to change the situation, they can become upset and frustrated, too. This creates a downward spiral that can bring down the people we care about right along with us.

Bottom line: Even though we might feel some temporary relief, gossiping and dwelling on conflicts just serve to make things worse.

Share Your Insights

Brad's boss seems to notice him complaining about Anita. How does this affect Brad's reputation and standing in the office? Is it better to be discreet and do this kind of complaining after hours? What does Brad's friend tell him?

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