The Five Most Common Mistakes in Dealing with Team Conflicts

By Mary O'Neill, MA, MFT

Mistake #1: Not Recognizing the Early Warning Signs of Team Conflict

Unresolved conflict causes contraction; its presence is palpable. People tend to either pull in or lash out. The most frequent early signs of tension are: rolling of eyes, shrugging of shoulders, silence at meetings, an angry tone of voice, rude behavior, gossiping, and sarcastic, negative or critical remarks – these are all indirect ways of communicating that something's not working. In later stages, teams become divided, backstabbing can occur, and absenteeism and turnover increase.

What can you can do? Address it. If you sense your team is in conflict, let them know you're aware of it and then schedule time to talk. Tell team members how much you value harmony and ask if they do, too. If so, then point out that recent actions don't appear to be in line with that value and speak about the specific behaviors you've noticed. Emphasize that stress levels can soar and productivity can plummet if you all don't agree to work through it.

Remember *"What you allow, you teach."* What do you want to teach your team?

Mistake #2: Avoiding Conflict

Many people feel so ill-equipped in dealing with conflict that they choose to avoid it all together, rather than risk intervening and possibly making matters worse. This is one of the biggest mistakes professionals can make because not dealing with conflict can drain a business of its energy, clients/customers and staff. Avoiding conflict simply doesn't work.

Think about the last time your needs clashed with another team member's – you may have given in, given up or even compromised to keep the peace. If you resort to that strategy repeatedly, however, your needs won't ever get met. Unfortunately, some professionals find the thought of confronting conflict so uncomfortable, they prefer to leave it unchecked. Tension inevitably mounts because needs continue to go unmet, resulting in more confusion, stress and loss of teamwork and productivity.

What can you do? Talk about it. The greatest advantage of addressing conflict – provided it's done skillfully – is that the lines of communication re-open and underlying unmet needs become clearer. That's the only way to get to the heart of what's troubling everyone and begin the process of finding the right solution.

Since starting the conversation seems to be the biggest obstacle to resolving conflict, finding the courage to broach the subject is the first step. Skill building is next.

Mistake #3: Not Understanding the High Cost of Conflict

According to researcher Daniel Dana, "Unresolved conflict represents the largest reducible cost to business, yet it remains mostly unrecognized."

Experts estimate that unresolved conflict can cost your business hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars a year; that 30% of a manager's time can be spent handling inter-personal conflict; that turnover is significantly higher in organizations where conflict remains unresolved; and that recruiting, hiring and training someone new can cost up to 150% of the replaced employee's salary.

What can you do? Learn about it. Conflict can be so expensive that you can't afford NOT to deal with it. Conflict not only spoils relationships and erodes productivity; it can also have a profound impact on your bottom line, especially if it's felt by the people you serve. The last thing you want is to have conflict spillover onto the customer! So it behooves everyone to get a handle on it.

Commit to investing a certain amount of time each year on personal and professional development. It's smart business practice to help build your team's interpersonal competencies. By doing so, every team member plays a role in restoring peace, maintaining productivity and creating a healthy work environment.

Mistake #4: Not Recognizing the Value Conflict Offers

Conflict is a normal, natural, healthy reaction that occurs simply because people are different. Everyone on your team experiences different feelings, thoughts and ideas. Each has his or her own interests and needs. When team members work closely with each other, it's inevitable that – at some point – their differences will clash.

What can you do? Discover the hidden gift of conflict. Conflict can actually be very constructive. It can lead to greater unity, cooperation, collaboration and often new and better ways of doing things – paving the way for higher functioning relationships, improved morale, and greater productivity and profitability.

You might discover for instance, that a previously avoided conversation finally reveals the need for more cross training to facilitate greater teamwork.

Mistake #5: Not Having a System in Place to Resolve Conflict

At some point, you can count on conflict surfacing within your organization. Yet everyone on your team can learn to deal with challenges more effectively. The key to strengthening workplace relationships is equipping team members with the right tools – and making sure they use them.

What can you do? Since conflict is a mind-body experience, great self-management tools are needed just as much as effective problem solving skills. To better handle the emotional reactions that accompany conflict, every team member needs to heighten awareness of their own stress cues. You can't create peace in an office, if you can't find it in yourself.

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Recommended 30 day practice: The next step is to find a problem solving model that's easy for everyone to understand and implement. An Attention to Needs Model can be very effective in encouraging open, honest communication and helping team members identify their needs, the needs of others, and the feelings that surround them. The goal is to arrive at a mutually satisfying solution and, ultimately, restore harmony.

Having team members sign a Conflict Resolution Contract, in which everyone agrees to follow a certain protocol, can also be helpful in getting everyone on the same page and ensuring greater compliance.

The bottom line is: you can vastly improve your chances of having greater peace and harmony by learning about, and taking steps to avoid, these 5 most common mistakes. Instead, you can create an emotionally healthy work environment where your staff, clients and business thrive!

About the Presenter:

Mary O'Neill, MA, MFT, is a speaker, trainer, and executive coach and founder of **Mary O'Neill & Associates**, a professional development company which offers programs in the areas of emotional intelligence, leadership development, stress management, conflict resolution and team building. She is based in San Anselmo, California.

With two decades of experience as a licensed psychotherapist, Mary is skilled at helping team members easily understand the often challenging communication and interpersonal issues that arise among workgroups everywhere.

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