Conflicts can generate a range of effects, from good ideas and minor irritation to serious operational disruption and lasting hostility.

Addressing Conflicts

Beyond problems with performance and employee conduct, conflicts are a fact of life in all organizations. Whether arising within the family or management team, among production employees, or between supervisor and workers, conflicts can generate a range of effects, from good ideas and minor irritation to serious operational disruption and lasting hostility.

Conflicts may be rooted in organizational, interpersonal, or intrapersonal conditions, and certainly no single prescription for resolving them applies to all. Several characteristics, however, are repeatedly observed in interpersonal conflicts, including the following:

- When conflict arises, the issue is not always articulated or clearly understood by either party.
- People in conflict do not usually take the time to understand one another's positions.
- People often avoid trying to resolve their conflicts through discussion.
- When people who disagree do converse, their discussions frequently become heated, tense, and aggressive.
- Conflicts are sometimes settled by one person "giving in" and maintaining resentment.
- Conflict more often has a negative than positive effect on a relationship.

People attempting to work through a conflict can bring into play all the communication skills discussed later in this chapter—active listening, paraphrasing, reframing, using "I" messages, focusing on behavior rather than personal attributes, and staying alert to body language. A calm demeanor, persistence, good will, and time also improve the odds of reaching a constructive resolution.

Both competition and interdependence between individuals or groups in an operation are "structural" sources of conflict. When frictions arise from people or crews not getting what they need because another has either taken it first or not produced it as expected, a dispassionate assessment can reveal underlying causes and point to solutions. The following steps are typical:

1. **Problem Definition.** Identify symptoms of trouble, opposing objectives, and concerns from perspectives of all involved. Distill a statement of the problem.
2. **Diagnosis.** Distinguish factors contributing to the conflict, personal as well as structural.
3. **Generation of Alternatives.** Collect various ideas to improve or change causal behaviors. No evaluating yet.
4. **Decision Making.** Compare ideas and choose a promising alternative that all parties accept.
5. **Tactical Planning.** Design a specific action plan to implement the decision and a schedule for periodic assessment.
6. **Implementation.** Make the adjustments and evaluate according to plan.

Although the outcome is more likely to be accepted if this process is conducted collaboratively, a manager with authority who prefers to decide alone what changes to make can utilize the same steps.

Conflict Management Styles

A framework developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann relates the modes of handling conflict to different combinations of two basic orientations: (1) assertiveness—the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness—the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy others' concerns.

Five distinct modes of handling conflict are:

- **Avoidance:** Pursuing neither one's own nor others' concerns.
- **Accommodation:** With high concern for others' needs, giving in to them.
- **Competition:** Being concerned only with one's own satisfaction and pursuing it at the expense of others. A power-oriented mode.
- **Compromise:** Being equally concerned with one's and others' needs and compromising between them. Never takes care of anyone fully.
- **Collaboration:** Showing great concern for both own and others' needs; working with the others to find a solution acceptable to all.

Circumstances in which each of the five modes are most appropriate, according to Thomas and Kilmar, follow: