

Conflict Resolution Skills for Managers

Seirbhís Chúnaimh
d'Fhostaithe na Státseirbhíse



Civil Service Employee
Assistance Service

www.cseas.per.gov.ie



Introduction

It is not unusual for conflict to arise in the workplace from time to time. When it does, it is important to take steps to try to resolve it as soon as possible. The fact that conflict has occurred is not necessarily bad as it can provide an opportunity to address tensions that may exist.

What is Conflict?

Conflict can be defined as a state of disharmony among people brought about by a clash of interests, values, actions and/or personalities. Many factors contribute to conflict situations such as individual needs, desires and expectations, differences in personalities, self-perceptions, self-esteem and opinions.

Possible Sources of Conflict in the Workplace

- Misunderstandings
- Personality clashes
- Interpersonal difficulties
- Miscommunications
- Changes in role
- Ineffective communication
- Rivalry & competition

Positive Aspects of Conflict

- Generates discussion and new possible courses of action
- Provides valuable opportunities to learn
- Energises a group, increasing its commitment
- Provides opportunities to 'nip things in the bud'

Unresolved Workplace Conflict

Unresolved conflict can have a negative impact in the workplace and may result in hostility, disruption, arguments, lack of communication, sick leave absences and split groups. All of the aforementioned can impact on colleagues and ultimately affect organisational effectiveness and efficiency.

Conflict Resolution and the Line Manager

Parties involved in a workplace conflict may approach each other in an attempt to resolve the conflict/issue themselves. This may not always be successful. Staff members may approach you, as line manager, about a conflict situation or issue. You may observe behaviours or incidents in the workplace which indicate a conflict situation such as

- Change in atmosphere in the office/section
- Tense silences
- Whispered conversations
- Aggressive body language
- Lack of co-operation
- Use of inappropriate humour
- Arguments
- Formation of cliques

As line manager you have a responsibility to actively address conflict situations in the workplace. You will need to speak with the relevant parties to ascertain the facts and move towards resolution. The following provides some guidance for addressing conflict situations and the skills required.

Conflict Resolution Process

Step 1 - Meet the parties individually

- Ensure a private setting is available
- Listen/talk to the first party(ies) without taking sides
- Talk to the other party(ies) involved to inform them of the issues that have been brought to your attention by the first party(ies)
- Listen impartially to all concerned

Step 2 - Meet all parties to the conflict together (if appropriate)

- Outline the reason for the meeting
- Explain the ground rules e.g. confidentiality, both/all parties will have a chance to speak, no interrupting, mutual respect, etc.
- Remain calm and impartial

Step 3 - Conduct the meeting

Gather Information

- Invite both/all parties in turn to give their account of the conflict/issue
- Let the parties know you have heard them by paraphrasing, summarising and acknowledging what they are saying
- You want the key issues to emerge. Take the opportunity to ask questions to clarify any issues

On-duty EAO available at 0818 008120

Monday - Thursday: 9am - 5.15pm

Friday: 9am - 5pm

Appointments are available evening
and weekends if required

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Agree the Problem

- At this step you state or clarify what you understand are the issues and check with the staff members attending that they agree. If there are several issues it may be useful to list them.

Brainstorm Solutions

- Ask all parties for their ideas and suggestions for resolution, e.g. what needs to happen to resolve this issue? What would help? What is not working? What do the parties feel the solution is?
- If the solution is to be successful it is important that all parties have a say and contribute and agree to the solution
- Be open to all ideas
- Perhaps make a suggestion on what you feel might help

Negotiate a Solution

- From the suggestions put forward during the brainstorming you now have to look for a solution which is acceptable to all parties (at least to some extent)
- You are aiming for a win/win situation
- Check if the solution proposed is feasible
- Do you, as line manager, have to put anything in place to facilitate the solution?
- Set a date to review progress

Step 4 - Review the situation

- Check in subsequently with the parties individually
- Hold a further group meeting if required

Conflict Resolution Skills

Skills required by you as a line manager to engage in the conflict resolution process include:

- Remaining impartial
- Active listening
- Paraphrasing – stating what you have heard in your own words
- Clarifying – use of questions
- Acknowledging feelings
- Summarising
- Questioning – open, closed, clarifying questions
- Extracting/identifying key issues
- Encouraging all parties to take part and suggest possible solutions
- Empathising with all parties
- Managing group meetings – asking parties to talk in turn
- Facilitating brainstorming – encouraging all to contribute

- Putting forward solutions
- Awareness of the bigger picture
- Taking note of decisions/solutions
- Testing options – Are they feasible?
- Giving positive feedback appropriately

Management Skills

While your ultimate aim is to assist the parties reach a win/win solution, this may not always be possible. As a line manager, it is your responsibility to address performance and behavioural issues in the workplace. You may need to be directive regarding solutions in line with Civil Service and divisional policies and procedures.

Should a solution not be possible, you may need to refer the issue to your HR Division. The option of formal mediation⁽¹⁾ may be considered if all parties agree to this.

Positive Working Environment

Creating a positive working environment is the responsibility of all staff members. It is expected that everyone ensures that their behaviour reflects a culture of dignity and respect.⁽²⁾ “Civil Servants should show due respect for their colleagues at work, including their values and beliefs”⁽³⁾

Supports

Your own immediate line manager and/or HR Division are available to you for guidance. As a line manager, you can make the parties aware of the availability of the CSEAS for support. You may also make a formal referral to the CSEAS where appropriate. The CSEAS is also available to support you by providing a confidential⁽⁴⁾ setting to talk through the issue(s), discuss conflict resolution skills and practice your approach. Refer to the CSEAS website for further information on CSEAS services www.cseas.per.gov.ie

1. For an information leaflet on the Civil and Public Service Mediation Initiative (CPSMI), please contact the CSEAS or your HR Division
2. Civil Service Dignity at Work policy 2015
3. Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour
4. Exceptions apply – see the CSEAS website for further information

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