

Activity 9

Dealing with conflict

Purpose

To consider the importance of dealing with conflict situations early and honestly – and the consequences of not doing so. To familiarise participants with their own company's grievance and disciplinary procedures.

FOR PREVIEW ONLY

Activity 9

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Introduction

Conflict within the team can be difficult for a team leader. If it is healthy rivalry, then it may be positive and stimulate competition. However, if it becomes personal and destructive, then it needs to be resolved.

Dealing with conflict early, honestly and by following the right procedure is essential. If this is not done, then the conflict has a habit of reappearing at a later date to cause a much deeper problem.

Purpose

To consider the importance of dealing with conflict situations early and honestly – and the consequences of not doing so. To familiarise participants with their own company's grievance and disciplinary procedures.

Application

This activity is best placed either as part of a management development programme, or as part of a programme dealing with personnel issues. It can also be used in programmes on Assertiveness, Communication, Considering Colleagues, Decision Making, Developing Others, Influencing Others, Leadership, Problem Solving, and Teamwork.

What happens

For this activity, you involve participants, in groups, in a two-part case study. They are not told initially that there are two parts, however, as this would indicate that the 'situation' in the case study escalates – something they should not realise until later in the activity.

In part one of the case study, you give them a conflict issue to resolve, where two group members are becoming antagonistic towards each other. Gary, the apparent aggressor, is behaving in a way that is upsetting one of his colleagues, Sara. You then ask the groups to discuss how they would handle the situation and to report back in the form of a presentation.

You then introduce the next stage, part two, which picks up the same scenario two weeks later. By this time Gary has threatened Sara, who now wants to make an official complaint against him. Working in groups, the participants use their own grievance and disciplinary procedures to decide what actions need to be taken to implement the grievance procedure for Sara and a disciplinary hearing for Gary.

Time

Overall time required: 2 hours 50 minutes

Note: The two parts of the case study need to be completed on the same day.

- Introduction: 5 minutes
 - A case study: 1 hour 15 minutes
 - A case study – part 2: 1 hour 30 minutes
- 3 Handout masters:
- 9.1 *Dealing with conflict – a case study*
 - 9.2 *Dealing with conflict*
 - 9.3 *A case study – part 2*
- Flipchart and stand or whiteboard
 - Marker pens for trainer
 - Flipchart paper and marker pens for participants
 - Paper and pens for participants
 - Wall, screens or whiteboard for displaying flipchart pages
 - Tape, Blu-Tack® or pins
 - Two copies of a grievance and disciplinary procedure – that of your own organisation if all participants belong to same company
 - Space for small-group work

Materials & resources

How do I do it?

INTRODUCTION

Begin by telling the participants that they are going to work on a case study involving conflict between two people in their group. Don't tell them at this stage that there is a part two, or that the conflict eventually escalates into disciplinary action.

A CASE STUDY



Distribute Handout 9.1

Dealing with conflict – a case study

Divide the participants into two groups, give each group a supply of flipchart paper and marker pens and allocate separate work areas. Tell them they have 45 minutes, in their groups, to consider what they feel is the most appropriate action to take in the situation described in Handout 9.1 Dealing with conflict – a case study. Tell them that they need to prepare a presentation to give to the other group within that 45 minutes, then start the exercise.

Whilst they are working, don't give the groups too much guidance – let them go with their own feelings. Some groups decide this is a situation that can be dealt with simply by 'banging their heads together'. If they decide on this course of action, their group will be in trouble in part two – but don't tell them that.

After 45 minutes, bring the groups back together and invite them to make their presentations. Reinforce and clarify their best suggestions for resolving the conflict. There are some basic principles that they need to have considered, of which the following are a few examples:

- Take conflict seriously – it will come back to bite you if you chase it away.
- Keep written records, including dates and, particularly, who said what to who.
- Involve others – the Human Resources department or your line manager.
- Talk to people honestly – don't hide away from the issues.
- Talk to everyone – the whole team is being affected.

- Don't make hasty judgements – Gary might be to blame but, equally, it may be that Sara is out to get him.
- Talk about issues, not personalities.
- Gary has an attitude problem. Talk to him about the skills needed to be the new team supervisor, and whether he feels he has those skills.
- Sara is uncomfortable when under threat – talk to her about how she would cope with the pressures of being a team supervisor.



Distribute Handout 9.2

Dealing with conflict

To conclude this part of the activity, discuss Handout 9.2 Dealing with conflict. It gives clear guidance on how to handle this level of conflict and forms the end of part one.

Allow 1 hour 15 minutes in total for this exercise.

A CASE STUDY – PART 2

Part two of the case study will enable participants to practise handling their own grievance and disciplinary procedures and to 'witness' how conflicts can escalate rapidly.

For the next exercise, you will need to have a copy of your own organisation's grievance and disciplinary procedure. If you don't have one, then the exercise can be run using the procedures of another organisation. Familiarise yourself with the procedure and look ahead to the list of questions given in the feedback session to assist you.

Ask participants to work in the same groups as before and brief them for part two of the case study. Tell them that it has now been two weeks since you spoke to Sara and Gary, and that over the fortnight things have got significantly worse. You have been away on holiday and, during that

time, Gary has threatened Sara. The first thing you are greeted with on your return is a visit from Sara, who wants to make a formal complaint against him.

There is no right answer to this case study, just as long as it follows the procedure laid down by the organisation. However, as the idea is that the participants get to know that procedure, tell them that you want them to go through the process of warning Gary – in line with the policy – and not to give him instant dismissal. In practice, a lot of policies give instant dismissal as a possible option on two grounds:

1. harassment and bullying
2. violent behaviour.

Tell them to report whether or not they think instant dismissal is an option; but to opt not to do that and go down the disciplinary route instead.



Distribute Handout 9.3

A case study – part 2

Give all the participants a copy of Handout 9.3 A case study – part 2, and tell the groups they have one hour to outline the procedures to be taken in respect of Gary and Sara, and to put these into the form of a 5-minute presentation. Ensure that they still have some flipchart paper and marker pens in case they decide to use them.

After one hour, bring the groups back together to listen to the presentations. Having familiarised yourself with the procedure before the session, you can now check the presentations to make sure that the following key areas are included in the groups' work, and that they have understood them correctly:

- How many written warnings are needed?
- Can this case go straight to final warning?

- How should Gary be notified?
- What is your investigation procedure?
- What is the format of the disciplinary hearing?
- How long does it take?
- What representation is Gary allowed?
- What is the appeals process?
- Is anyone suspended from duty at this stage?
- What information should be passed to Sara?
- What are Sara's entitlements under the grievance procedure?

The whole point of part two of this activity is to familiarise participants with the company's grievance and disciplinary procedure, so the more they can find out the better.

Having listened to the presentations, discuss any issues you feel need to be raised. Finally, ask the group: What would happen if the team leader in part one had dismissed the conflict as 'a storm in a teacup' and told them to go away and sort themselves out?

You can expect the answer that, essentially, the team leader would be in trouble. Participants should be encouraged to expand on this answer to explain that, on the one hand, Gary could appeal against his warning on the grounds that no one had told him to change what he was doing. Sara, on the other hand, could claim that the company was not protecting her, as she had complained of bullying and nothing was done. The disciplinary hearing would take the situation back to when it first began. You, as team leader, would be called to explain how the situation was dealt with in the early stages. If it was not handled properly, the team leader could be in serious trouble.

Allow 1 hour 30 minutes for this exercise.



Dealing with conflict – a case study

In your group, you have 45 minutes to read this case study, decide on your course of action and record it in preparation for a presentation.

You are a Team Leader with a small team of four people. One of your team is Gary who is 38 years old. Gary has worked for the company for 7 years and has a very good work record, although he is not all that good at dealing with other people. He is very forthright in his opinions and does sometimes upset other team members.

Sara is the most recent member of your team, having joined only last month. Sara worked for your company until 5 years ago when she left to have a baby, and now she has returned. In her previous position, she was highly regarded by the company and tipped for promotion.

The company is undergoing a restructuring, and you are to be given responsibility for two other teams, giving you overall responsibility for 14 people. It has been decided that one person from each of these teams, including your present team, will be given the title of 'Team Supervisor'.

No decision has yet been made as to who will be promoted, but this restructuring has been known about for the last 3 months, and Gary has assumed that, as the longest serving and most experienced member of your team, he will be the natural choice. However, since Sara's arrival there has been a lot of tension in the team, and Gary feels threatened by the possibility that she will get the promotion.

Sara has not made any complaint to you, but you have noticed a steady deterioration in Gary's attitude towards Sara. Other people have also commented on how rude he has become towards her, and Sara is obviously being upset by him.

How would you, as a team leader, handle this conflict? Consider what action you would need to take towards Sara, Gary and the other members of the team.

Record your team's ideas on a sheet of flipchart paper.





Dealing with conflict

- **Stay calm, objective, impartial and dispassionate.**
- **Involve the HR Department or your line manager as early as possible.**
 - Give information and details to them.
 - Take advice and guidance from them.
- **Keep records** – Think back to when you first heard about the problem and record:
 - what was said
 - what was done
 - what actions you took.
- **Initiate open and honest discussion.**
 - Try to concentrate on issues rather than personalities.
 - Talk to everyone concerned, not necessarily together or at the same time.
 - Be honest and confront the issues.
 - Express your concerns as a team leader.
 - Get honest feedback.
 - Be truthful about possible consequences.
 - Deal in facts.
- **Try to provide practical solutions.**
 - Look for solutions acceptable to all parties.
 - Help individuals to develop their own solutions.
 - Provide ongoing coaching and support.
 - Review and monitor the situation.
- **Remember the effect on the rest of the team.**





A case study – part 2

In your groups, you have one hour to read through and discuss the following case study, outline the procedures to be taken with regard to Gary and Sara, and put together a 5-minute presentation.

Two weeks have passed since you took action to resolve the conflict between Gary and Sara, during which time you have been away on holiday.

Whilst you have been away, the situation has become worse and yesterday Gary threatened Sara. He became extremely aggressive, and told her that if she got the job he would make her life impossible.

Sara came to see you this morning to make a formal complaint against him, and asked you to begin disciplinary proceedings. Sara is quite adamant that if the situation is not resolved she will leave.

In your group, use the company grievance and disciplinary procedure to outline the steps you need to take for the following two actions:

1. begin the grievance procedure for Sara
2. take disciplinary action against Gary.

Present the steps you would take for the above in the form of a 5-minute presentation, including any factors that you think you would need to consider or take particular care over.

