

Critical Business Tools for Conflict Resolution

Ever felt the tension in the hallway at your workplace? Or, been in a meeting and watched as the bosses argued for their turf? Conflicts are a normal part of all human relationships, the business world no different. The consequences of conflicts can cripple effective dialogue between co-workers, between businesses partnering with one another, between businesses and customers, and between businesses and communities.

Conflicts in the workplace can create costs due to wasting time, making poor choices, turnover, re-assigning jobs to keep warring parties apart, employee sabotage or theft, low motivation, and higher healthcare costs. A study conducted in the 1990's found that managers spend 42 percent of their time turning conflicts into agreements.

Unresolved conflicts limit an organization's alternatives, cloud its vision, and drain resources. Serious conflicts can lead to the breakup or bankruptcy of the organization through a slow downward spiral or a catastrophic court case.

Listening plays a central role in both conflict and conflict resolution in a business environment. When tensions escalate, our ability to listen deteriorates.

Conflict occurs because people are wired to fight, flight, or freeze under excess pressure. In particular, it's only human nature to move to an offensive or defensive position when feeling threatened or uncertain. When neither option is available, we are wired to freeze, or try to hide. Unfortunately, communication and trust break down when one or more parties to a business relationship take an inflexible, defensive position.

Conflicts can be defused and pushed in the direction of consensual solutions by asking the parties in conflict to complete a simple exercise in which each listens to the others, is aware of being listened to by the others, and collaborates with the others in working towards agreement. Going through this process together lessens feelings of threat and uncertainty by better informing each about the others and their common problems. At the same time, each experiences the others showing them respect and their willingness to cooperate. After this exchange of listening, the parties often are able to take a business-like "win-win" stake in working together.

Conflict resolution processes can be fast, inexpensive, and low risk compared to typical consequences of conflict such as lower productivity, the end of business relationships (losing team members or customers, for example), or going to court.

The most basic conflict resolution procedure for business involves bringing in a neutral party, such as an Executive Coach, to facilitate an exchange of listening between parties who disagree--and blame each other for the disagreement--but want to (or must) work together anyway.

Conflict resolution processes are powerful because listening and being listened to costs almost nothing and can rapidly rob conflicts of momentum and/or bring them to resolution.

1. Why is listening an important part of conflict resolution?

2. What are the cost's of conflict not being resolved?