

Mastering Tough Talks

'Conflict Busting' in the Workplace

Putting out fires is an all-too-common job requirement for many managers. If any of your corporate clients are struggling with establishing positive conflict resolutions among their employees – or they just need a little refresher in confronting these challenges, the National Conflict Resolution Center's Steven Dinkin, Barbara Filner, and Lisa Maxwell offer advice for employee assistance professionals on how they can help managers and supervisors master these tough talks.

A long-time consultant is offended by something a new salesperson said on a conference call and is threatening to leave. An employee in marketing is furious about being passed over for a promotion in favor of her co-worker and is trying to discredit her. These are just a few of the examples of the workplace conflicts that take up nearly half (an estimated 42%) of a typical manager's time. The trick to moving past these conflicts and on to increased productivity for everyone at an organization, says Steven Dinkin, lies in knowing how to approach the topics in a way that leads to improved working relationships.

"Disagreements, disputes, and honest differences are normal in any workplace," says Dinkin, co-author, along with Barbara Filner and Lisa Maxwell of *The Exchange: A Bold and Proven Approach to Resolving Workplace Conflict* (CRC Press, 2011, \$39.95, www.ncrconline.com). "When these normal occurrences are treated as opportunities for exploring new ideas about projects, they can become catalysts for increased energy and productivity. Getting to that place starts with an honest discussion."

What is 'The Exchange'?

Dinkin knows what he is talking about. He, Filner, and Maxwell have spent years heading

up the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC). Their new book supplies readers with proven tools for resolving emotionally charged disputes.

The Exchange itself is a four-stage, structured process specifically designed to encourage discussion of all the issues in dispute – even the intense, emotional issues – in ways that are more productive than a gripe session. The process derives from the conflict resolution model used successfully by National Conflict Resolution Center mediators for more than 25 years and includes constructive techniques to use in face-to-face meetings with disputing or disruptive employees. The method can be used to break down barriers – and to create changes that have a positive effect on a workforce.

It's important to note that The Exchange was designed *by* mediators *for* managers. Managers learn a structure and skills similar to those mediators know and use, but it also takes into account managers' responsibilities, both to their companies and their employees.

"A key difference between managers and mediators," Dinkin explains, "is that managers are not expected to be neutral. They have the responsibility of reinforcing the interests of the department and the company for which they work. The Exchange teaches managers the right combination of skills and structure, as well as the finesse, to express the needs of the company.

"The Exchange begins with the manager – and ends with employees meeting with the manager to develop effective solutions," he adds. "Like most managers, you probably did not set out to be a conflict resolver. And you probably find it more than a little frustrating to be your company's resident 'fire chief.' The Exchange teaches you to resist the temptation to simply tell people what to do. Actively engaging your employees in problem solving helps them take responsibility



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for the problem and for the solution. When you know how to address workplace conflicts properly, these challenging situations can lead to creative resolutions that re-energize the workplace and bring new ideas to old problems.”

Recommendations

The following tips – excerpted from *The Exchange* – will demonstrate how managers can turn their next meeting with conflicting employees into a productive conversation.

❖ **Start with an icebreaker.** Most people will be ready to complain, debate, or argue at the beginning of any conflict-based conversation. They have marshaled their most compelling arguments and are ready for battle. However, if managers dive in immediately on the topic of controversy, most people will quickly get stuck in defending their positions and attacking their opponents.

“That’s why you need to do something different,” says Dinkin. “The Exchange teaches that you should begin with an icebreaker. This is not just a light introductory activity. It is a way to non-confrontationally initiate a conversation about difficult issues. An ideal icebreaker asks for a person’s own take on something that’s both work-related and positive. For example, if the conflict involves two employees involved in the same project, you might break the ice by asking each of them how they became involved in the project and what they hoped to achieve.”

Exercise: *Help participants come up with an icebreaker that will “get the ball rolling” on a specific conflict between management and employees.*

❖ **Listen.** Conflict resolution is tricky because too many managers ignore the fact that sometimes what they *aren’t* saying is more important than what they are saying. Often the

best resolutions come from listening carefully to what the other person has to say. Being an active listener sends the message that you are genuinely concerned about him or her and the dispute. Put plain and simply, it’s the best way to get good information.

“Ask an open-ended question,” advises Dinkin. “It can be something as simple as, ‘So, tell me, what’s going on?’ Then listen carefully to that person’s side of the story. You’ll know it’s time to insert yourself into the conversation when the discussion turns negative.

“You can acknowledge someone’s emotions without seeming like you are taking his or her side,” Dinkin adds. “Especially at the beginning of talking about a conflict, you’re building rapport, even if it’s with an employee you’ve spoken with millions of times before. When there’s a conflict, you’re treading on new ground, and showing that person you are willing to see his or her side of the story is how you will set the foundation for working toward a solution.”

Exercise: *Sometimes people “think” they’re listening better than they really are. An EA professional could verbally explain a simple, but “multi-step” procedure such as offering directions where the HR department is located for new employees who have questions about their company benefits. Then ask participants to recite the steps word for word and see how well they were following along!*

Exercise: *Have participants come up with an “open-ended” question or two tailored especially for them as part of the listening stage.*

❖ **Use and encourage positive language.** This step might seem like a no-brainer, but any

frustrated manager knows how easy it can be to slip into negativity after a conflict has affected a work group. Always *think* before you *speak*. Use positive, easy-to-understand language. Don't fall into the trap of reciting paragraphs from a company's HR manual.

"Remember, you're having a conversation, not a trial," Dinkin stresses. "If you keep the language positive, whoever you're addressing will likely mirror what you're doing. Even referring to the department's needs can be stated in very positive terms, which will lead to a more collaborative (rather than punitive) tone in the discussion. For example, a manager could say, *'This has increasingly affected the entire team, and we need to address it so we can get everyone focused back on the project goals and having a comfortable working environment. I am looking forward to establishing a good working relationship between the two of you and improving morale for everyone on the team.'* A statement like this would set a constructive atmosphere. When you keep things positive, you can work toward great solutions efficiently and effectively."

Exercise: Ask participants to list examples of some positive language that would prove useful in their particular conflict.

Work toward SMART solutions. Sustainable solutions are SMART solutions. That means they're:

Specific: Be clear about who will do what, when, where, and how.

Measurable: Be clear about how you will all be able to tell that something has been done, achieved, or completed.

Achievable: Make sure that whatever solution you agree on fits the situation; that it complies with both the law and organizational policy; that everyone involved has the ability

and opportunity to do what is required of them. Don't set up anyone to fail.

Realistic: Check calendar dates for holidays and vacations; look at past performance to predict future actions; allow extra time for glitches and delays; don't assume that the best-case scenarios will come true.

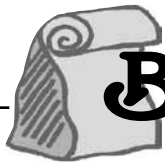
Timed: Create reasonable deadlines or target dates; include a few ideas about what to do if something unexpected occurs; be willing to set new dates if necessary.

"Once you have your SMART solutions in place, immediately put them in writing," Dinkin states. "Putting solutions in writing is very important, and not just for legal reasons. It's a way to honor the work that you and your employees have accomplished. It's also a way to keep people's memories from diverging from the agreed-upon solutions. Verbal agreements have a way of being remembered very differently by different people – and then becoming the subject of another conflict. It's safer and easier for everyone to have the solutions written down, in order to be able to easily verify them later."

Summary

"Disputes, full of emotional complexities and interpersonal histories, are the headaches of the workplace," Dinkin concludes. "They're always going to pop up, even in the most cordial of workplace environments. The good news is that when managers are armed with the tools they need to work toward productive resolutions, they and their employees can use them to strengthen an organization rather than harm it." ■

*Headquartered in San Diego, California, the NCRC has provided mediation, facilitation, and conflict resolution training since 1983. **Editor's note:** The Exchange and NCRC are provided as an example of a successful conflict-resolution process, for employee assistance professionals in need of recommendations and advice on this particular subject matter – but not as an endorsement of this specific method and organization.*



Important Traits for Resolving Conflicts

The following are among the important traits of managers and employees who effectively resolve conflicts:

❖ **Effective conflict resolvers understand an individual's needs.** Does the person want to vent? Brainstorm solutions? Effective conflict resolvers know what both parties want, and if they don't, they find out.

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❖ **Effective conflict resolvers are collaborative listeners.** Listening is crucial, but effective conflict resolvers take this a step further and *support* the other person. As with point #1, the individual needs to feel heard.

❖ **Effective conflict resolvers are good communicators.** They know how to pick up on positive messages and communicate them carefully, so that progress improves.

❖ **Effective conflict resolvers are more interested in a good solution, than a hasty one.** Effective negotiators recognize that while it's important to not drag one's feet, neither do you

want to be so anxious for a resolution that you'll settle for anything. Do that, and you'll simply revisit the issue later.

Chances are that effective conflict resolvers are also good at “brainstorming.” The following are a few suggestions:

❖ **Don't rehash the past.** Don't get bogged down on what did or didn't work before. View all ideas as being of value, if only to stimulate new thinking.

❖ **Let others share the wealth.** Invite others with special knowledge or awareness (such as an EA professional) to help generate ideas. It sometimes takes a more objective, third party to look at situations in unique ways.

Summary

Don't assume that all conflict should be avoided. In fact, conflict – when done constructively – can lead to healthy change for an organization. It's when employees or managers argue pointlessly, over non-productive issues, that conflict is bad. Act from a point of understanding instead of judgment. ■



Sources: Dina Beach Lynch, former ombudsman for Fleet Bank; and “Taking Charge of Anger: How to Resolve Conflict, Sustain Relationships, and Express Yourself Without Losing Control,” by W. Robert Nay, Guilford Press, www.guilford.com.