DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION
OFFICE OF COLLABORATION AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Conflict Management Systems Overview

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Introduction

Conflict can occur anywhere two or more parties disagree. All groups, communities, and organizations experience conflict. To address conflict, some organizations put a "conflict management system" in place to prevent, manage, and resolve conflict and sustain resolution (see Gosline et al., 2001). Organizational leaders can intentionally design processes and systems to support mindsets and behaviors to deal with conflict constructively and proactively. Having an internal conflict management system may also help employees deal with external conflict with clients and the public.

Elements of a conflict management system

A conflict management system can include any of the following elements listed below. These structures, processes, and approaches to handling conflict should align and interact to form a cohesive system.

1. **Conflict management champion** - At least one organizational leader models and encourages healthy conflict resolution - e.g., commissioner, senior leader, union leader, etc.
2. **Conflict management-supportive strategy and guiding documents** - Organizing documents reflect the importance of healthy conflict resolution - e.g., values statement, strategic plan, etc., mention collaboration and healthy conflict
3. **Human resources** - Informal and/or formal roles exist to help resolve or manage conflict - e.g., mediator, ombuds, HR representative or manager trained in conflict resolution.
4. **Financial resources** - Non-personnel resources are allocated to managing conflict.
5. **Policy and procedure** - Organization-specific policies and procedures document how conflicts can be resolved.
6. **Conflict resolution options** - The organization makes a variety of conflict resolution options available to employees - e.g., informal negotiation, coaching, facilitated discussion, mediation, formal grievance process, etc.
7. **Conflict resolution timing** - Employees are encouraged to handle conflicts right away, rather than letting them fester or escalate.
8. **Communication** - The organization communicates to employees in plain language when and how to use various conflict resolution options.
9. **Employee training** - Employees participate in basic conflict resolution training. Some employees receive advanced training and may act as peer conflict coaches or neutral facilitators.
10. **HR processes** – Assessing conflict resolution skills is part of the interview process and factors into hiring. The ability to resolve conflicts well factors into performance evaluations. Supervisors and

managers are encouraged to continuously develop conflict management skills. HR is a strategic partner in managing conflict.

11. **Mindset, norms, and behaviors** – Employees take a problem-solving approach to addressing conflict. They feel comfortable respectfully challenging ideas. Employees address conflict in healthy and direct ways.
12. **Ongoing management and evaluation of the conflict management system** - There is oversight and coordination for conflict management and evidence is reviewed regularly to evaluate how well the system is working - e.g., # of conflict resolution training participants, # of employee complaints, annual litigation costs, etc.

Every organization is different, so each organization should adopt a tailored approach to implementing a conflict management system. The system should not be considered an "add-on," but part of everyday organizational life (Lipsky & Avgar, 2010). The system elements should work together and reinforce each other.

Reflection questions

1. Does your organization have one or more of the conflict management system elements in place? If so, are employees aware of these supports?

2. If none of these elements are in place, what do you wish were in place and why? What problem(s) in your organization would a conflict management system solve?

3. Is there a next step you would like to take based on your responses to Questions 1 or 2?

Resources

- Designing Systems and Processes for Managing Disputes: This textbook describes how third parties can intervene creatively and effectively in entrenched conflict, in communities, in organizations, and with the public.
- Organizational Conflict Management - What's a System?: In this article, John Ford describes features and benefits of designing conflict management systems.
- Questions to Consider for Developing Conflict Resolution Systems: Ken Cloke provides questions to consider when an organization is beginning to designing its conflict resolution/management system.