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Facing the Fallacies

10 Common Misconceptions
About Conflict in the Workplace



Misconception 1:

“Conflict is *inherently* bad and unhealthy.”

There are those who feel that conflict of any kind is both disruptive and destructive. But, as the old song title goes, *It ain't necessarily so!*

The fact is, conflict can be both beneficial and desirable. Whether it comes in the form of differing viewpoints, honest disagreements, complaints, disputes, or internal “cognitive dissonance” – conflict challenges the status quo; it forces us to examine our thinking and behavior ... to reflect on *what* we do and *how* we do it. And more times than not, it's conflict that is the genesis of innovation and positive change. So, is conflict inherently bad (the key word being *inherently*)? Absolutely not! Are there times, however, when conflict *is* unhealthy and destructive? Of course!

With few exceptions, the most counterproductive forms of conflict found in organizations typically involve “beefs” between coworkers. The scenario is all too common: someone says or does something that ticks someone else off. As a result, communication and cooperation between the parties dwindle and, eventually, the quality and quantity of their work is negatively impacted. That's why it's imperative that *interpersonal* issues be addressed and lasting resolution achieved – which is what the majority of this book is all about.

And so, when it comes to “conflict,” the challenges for all of us are clear: 1) welcome, accept, and utilize its positive aspects to enhance our results, and 2) minimize and/or eliminate those negative aspects which far too often are obstacles to our success.

Misconception 2:

“Conflict doesn’t occur that often in the workplace.”

In the real world, nothing could be further from the truth! Wherever there are people who must interact with one another, day in and day out, there *will* be conflict. That’s just simply a fact of life.

When you think about it, business organizations (and the teams that comprise them) are collections of individuals from diverse backgrounds who bring unique ideas, needs, expectations, and individual personalities with them to the job. For every assertive person, there’s another employee who’s more passive; for every risk taker, there’s someone else who prefers a more conservative approach; for every immediate reactor, there’s an in-depth analyzer; for every ... oh well, you get the picture.

When all of these different human traits and behaviors come together, there will, unquestionably, be clashes. It’s inevitable that a bunch of people are going to step on a bunch of *other* people’s toes – a bunch of times. That’s perfectly natural and no real problem in and of itself. What *is* cause for concern, however, is the fact that so many of those naturally occurring conflicts are not effectively resolved and, instead, are allowed to fester.

People who feel that negative conflicts don’t occur that often in the workplace are either oblivious to the existence of issues, or they just choose to ignore them. Either way, that’s a huge problem.

Focus 90% of your time on solutions and only 10% of your time on problems.

~ Anthony J. D’Angelo

Misconception 3:

“Conflict is always a matter of *right vs. wrong.*”

When you think about interpersonal conflict between two people, what comes to mind? What can you conclude from your own experiences of friction with a coworker? Do you presume that there’s always an “instigator” who is in the wrong and a “victim” who has done *nothing* wrong – and therefore is right? Do you blame the “instigator” for the conflict and believe that he or she, alone, bears the responsibility for making a behavior change? If you answered yes to either (or both) of those last two questions, you might want to do some rethinking.

While it’s true that *some* conflicts are clearly issues of right vs. wrong, it’s not always the case. And assuming otherwise is a dangerous and counterproductive mindset to have. Why? Because, often, “right” and “wrong” are *relative* terms; they’re perceptual issues. And with few exceptions, people tend to believe that they are right most of the time. It’s usually “the other guy” who’s at fault. After all, “I’ve done nothing wrong, so there’s nothing I need to do about this. It’s all him ... it’s all her!”

The problem is that “him” or “her” is thinking the exact same thing! As a result, neither party makes an effort to address and resolve their differences. And in the end, BOTH parties end up being at fault.

So, clearly, conflicts are not always a matter of right vs. wrong. Many times, they are about two competing wrongs ... or even two competing rights. Either way, **it takes two to tangle!**

Misconception 4:

“Conflicts are the result of clashing personalities.”

False! In fact, just the opposite is true: interpersonal conflicts *aren't* the result of personality clashes at all. “Whoa!” you say. “That bold statement can't possibly be correct!” Well, don't close the book – obviously, an explanation is in order.

Think about it for a moment. Just what is a *personality*, anyway? Can you touch one? Can you hold it? Can you take a picture of it? Can you do a persectomy and cut one out? Of course not! That's because “personality” is a nebulous, intangible concept. It's a judgment ... a conclusion ... a label – that stems from a series of specific, observable **behaviors**. It's what a person *does* that leads to generalizations about his or her personality, and it's what people actually *do* (or *don't* do) that is at the core of conflict.

Bottom line: Conflicts are the result of behaviors – not personality clashes. And that's a good news story. Why? Because when it comes to resolving problems, it's a lot easier for people to change their daily actions and behaviors than it is to overhaul their individual “personalities.”

To the best of my knowledge, nobody ever 'personalitied' his or her way into trouble ... or out of it!

~ Paul Sims

Misconception 5:

“Conflict is most prevalent in crisis situations.”

Just about everyone (and every group), at one time or another, faces some type of “crisis” situation at work. Typically, when things turn bad, our backs are against the proverbial wall. Issues, demands, and challenges are coming at us at a fast and furious pace. Often, there’s little time for analysis, consensus building, ensuring political correctness, or just plain being “nice” when we’re putting out fires. We must move quickly as we act, react, adjust, and respond to whatever comes our way. Put all that together and it’s safe to conclude that crises offer the highest and most common potential for interpersonal conflict ... right? Not really!

Think about the last workplace “crisis” you were involved with. If you’re like most folks, you’ll recall that everyone in your group tended to pull together – to assume whatever role that was needed ... to do whatever was necessary to make it through. Chances are you let more things slide, cut each other more “slack,” and were a lot less sensitive to coworker behaviors that you would, at other times, consider to be disturbing. Why? Because your backs were against the wall, *together* – and because you all had a unified purpose ... a common goal: survival. Once the crisis subsided, however, people probably began reverting back to their normal behaviors, their old habits, and their heightened sensitivities. That’s perfectly normal. And that’s why a “perfectly normal” (*non-crisis*) situation is where you’re most likely to find conflict rearing its ugly head.

So, if you’re looking to minimize conflict where you work, pay special attention to what’s happening when things are running *smoothly*.

Misconception 6:

“Most conflicts resolve *themselves* over time.”

Yeah, right ... if only that were true! Don't you just wish that all interpersonal problems were self-repairing? Things would be so much easier. We probably wouldn't lose as much sleep, or have as many knots in our stomachs, or have as many days when we go home feeling beat up and emotionally drained. There would be less tension ... less stress. We wouldn't need the courage to confront issues. We wouldn't need the skills and strategies necessary to solve problems. And one more thing: We wouldn't be in the real world!

Here's one you can take to the bank: Unlike fine wine, conflicts that are left alone rarely improve with age. They're much more likely to fester and decay. Sure, we can ignore them – or learn to live with them – but the odds are miniscule that they'll evaporate into thin air and then all will be well with the world again.

Fact is, conflicts must be resolved the same way they were started in the first place – through human actions. They must be confronted, addressed, and worked through. Will doing so be pleasant? Probably not. Is that a good enough reason for avoiding issues? *Absolutely* not!

Remember this: When it comes to conflict, time heals all wounds – as long as they are *treated* first.

Problems do not go away. They must be worked through or else they remain, forever a barrier to the growth and development of the spirit.

~ M. Scott Peck

Misconception 7:

“People usually know when they’ve disturbed someone else.”

The key word that makes this statement a fallacy is “usually.” Certainly, there are times when it’s clear that we’ve disturbed a colleague and set the wheels of conflict in motion. We see or hear the other person’s reaction to something we’ve done – or perhaps we’re clued in by another coworker – and we realize there’s a problem brewing. But there are also many times when we have absolutely no idea that we’ve hurt, offended, or otherwise disturbed someone else. Nothing is said, no reactions are seen, and we continue to go along our merry way – only later to be surprised with the news that bad feelings have been churning.

You see, we all tend to judge ourselves by our intentions. If our intentions are good and noble (which they usually are), then in our minds, the actions resulting from those intentions must also be good and noble. But others have no way of knowing what our true intentions are, so they judge us by their perceptions of, and reactions to, what we do. Sometimes those perceptions are negative. And if the “offendee” fails to say something, we’re left totally in the dark.

So, what’s the key learning here? It’s simply this: Don’t assume that people always know when they’ve done things to sow the seeds of conflict. If you have a problem with someone, it’s up to YOU to tactfully surface the issue. Otherwise, you’ll end up doing nothing to help resolve the conflict – waiting, instead, for him or her to make the first move. And if that other person is clueless to your feelings, you’ll be waiting for a very long time.

Misconception 8:

“Conflicts only impact the disputing parties.”

If that statement were true, there would be much less concern about conflict – and much less emphasis on conflict resolution – in many organizations today. You probably wouldn’t have been given this book. Heck, we might not have even written it! After all, if two people have a beef with each other and they don’t see eye to eye, what’s the big deal? Well, the *big deal* is this: Unresolved conflicts affect many more people than just the “combatants.” A lot of folks are negatively impacted when coworkers are at odds with one another.

Certainly, it all starts with the **disputing parties** themselves. Conflict hampers communication and cooperation; it hinders each person’s ability to do his or her best, most creative work – and to experience the full satisfaction that normally comes with it. But the problem doesn’t stop there. The tension and stress of conflict spills over onto **other members of the team** as well. They *know* what’s going on, they don’t want to “take sides” or “walk on eggshells,” and they must deal with – and often compensate for – the counterproductive behaviors that typically result from other people’s conflict. And that makes it difficult for them to do *their* best work, too.

And then, of course, there are **internal and external customers** – those who are the unfortunate recipients of the goods and services provided by a struggling, out-of-sync team. Your customers may never know that a conflict is taking place within your work group, but they probably *would* care if they knew. Why? Because like many other people, they are affected!

Misconception 9:

“Resolving employee conflict is management’s responsibility.”

In response to that statement, we offer this timeless lesson from *Reality 101*: As adults, each of us is responsible for our own lives and careers. We “own” the choices we make, the actions we take, and – for the most part – the situations we find ourselves in. So, whenever our behaviors prove to be problematic or our situations become less than desirable, each of us, individually, is also responsible for doing something about it ... for fixing what’s broken.

As members of an organization, employees are expected to maintain positive and productive working relationships with their coworkers. Doing so is critical to overall business success. It’s a basic requirement of the job – one that *isn’t* being met whenever conflict is present. So, when two or more employees have a problem with each other, it’s up to THEM to talk about it and work through it. Sometimes that actually happens. Many times, it doesn’t.

It’s no secret that dealing with conflict is an unpleasant task. As a result, many people avoid it any way they can. One of the most common rationales (i.e., “excuses”) offered for such inaction is this: *That’s what my boss gets paid for. Solving problems is management’s responsibility, not mine.* Well, that’s just not the case when it comes to interpersonal issues between adults. Sure, managers *do* have a role to play. They need to encourage cooperation and open communication. They need to show people how to solve problems. And they need to intervene when team members are either unable or unwilling to resolve their differences. But none of that changes the fact that the primary responsibility for conflict resolution *always* rests with those directly involved in the issues.

Misconception 10:

“Conflicts continue mostly because of stubbornness and a lack of caring.”

Is stubbornness a reason why some conflicts occur and then continue without being properly addressed? Yes. Will there be times when one (or more) of the people involved in a conflict doesn't care enough to do anything about the problem? Occasionally. Are stubbornness and a lack of caring the *main* reasons that so many conflicts remain unresolved? NO!

Most of us really *do* care about the relationships we have with our colleagues. After all, we spend a large portion of our waking hours interacting with, and relying upon, our fellow teammates. We want those hours to be as pleasant and trouble-free as possible. When they're not, we're bothered ... we feel it. And the feeling isn't good. In fact, it's lousy!

But, if conflict makes us so uncomfortable, why is it we don't always address and resolve problems as soon as they surface? The answer is this: **We lack the skills and confidence needed to effectively address the issues we face.** We're not sure WHAT it is we should do ... we don't know HOW to achieve the resolution we want. The thought of confronting others often causes more discomfort than the problem itself. And so we do nothing – sometimes allowing a veil of stubbornness to hide the real, underlying issue: we're just plain scared.

Are you confident in your ability to handle any future workplace conflicts in which you may become involved? If your answer is “yes,” congratulations! The pages that follow should reinforce what you already know. If your answer is “no,” we have more good news: you're about to learn what to do!