



Training Conflict at work

No workplace is immune from conflict. Where it is not effectively dealt with, conflict can debilitate organisation performance. Conflict resolution skills are therefore an important competency for managers, supervisors and employees. This note explores some of the dimensions of conflict resolution at work.

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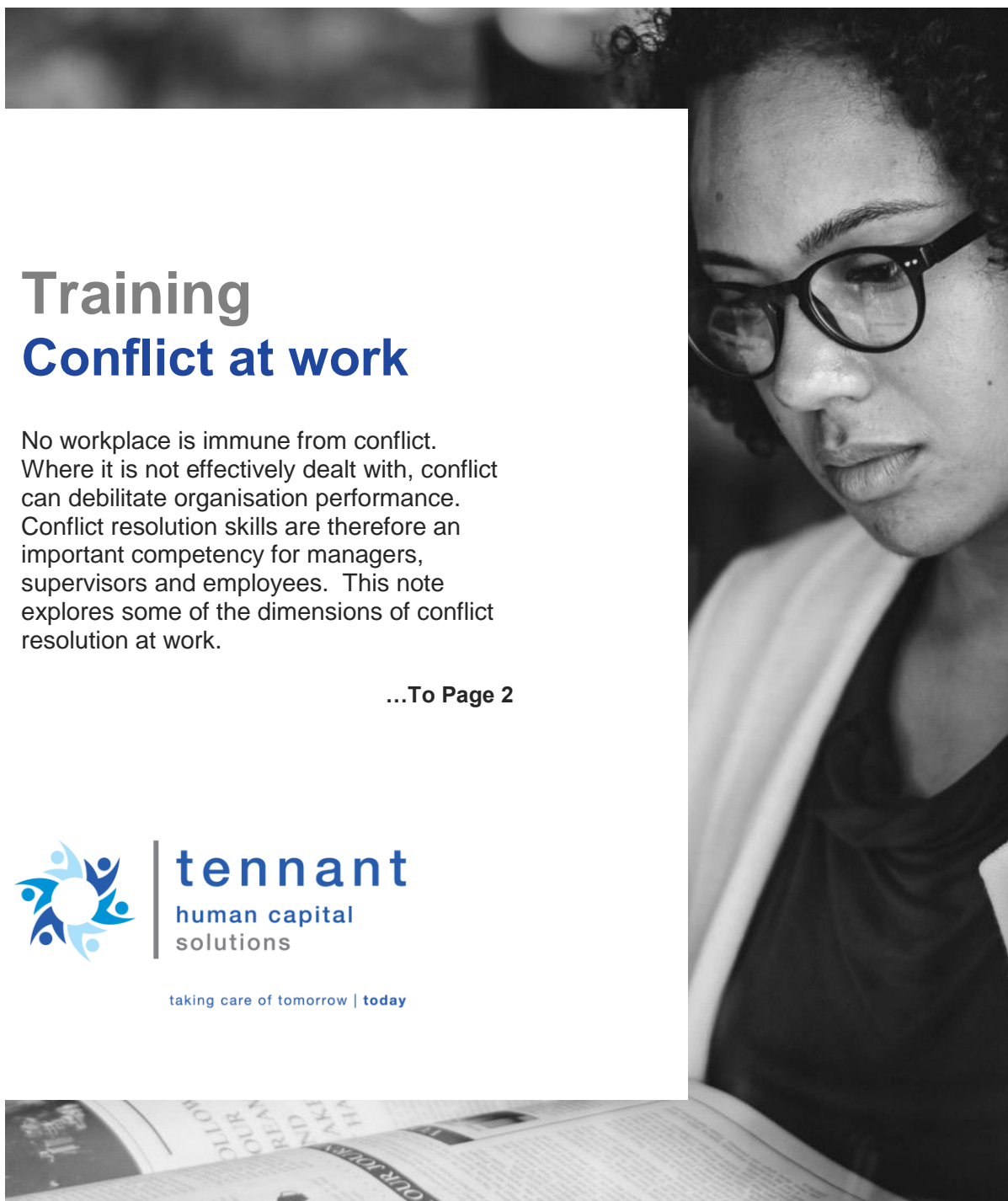
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(+27) 11 100 8110
info@tennant.co.za
www.tennant.co.za
Licence No. 43648



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Training

Conflict at work

Workplace conflict is neither good nor bad. Conflict is inevitable when people associate with each other at work. It occurs when two [or more] parties struggle over perceived incompatibility of their goals (Lebedun, 1998). Tim wants the office window open; Tom wants it shut. The marketing director wants ten customisable features on a new product; the production manager wants one. Management is offering a 4% wage increase; the union wants 10%. When these apparently irreconcilable differences are ignored, avoided, or dealt with in a way which leaves a party feeling unjustly dealt with, then the conflict is likely to escalate and manifest in unhealthy consequences which may include aggression, low morale, litigation, strikes, personal stress, deterioration in teamwork and/or staff turnover. It is not good for business.

“Two [or more] parties struggle over perceived incompatibility of their goals.”

Jean Lebedun

An organisation which accepts that conflict is a given in human interaction and develops processes to deal with conflict and trains employees in conflict resolution skills will have an edge over an organisation which does not. Well managed conflict can enhance business performance. According to Boyle (2017), five benefits of resolved conflict are:

1. Earlier Problem Identification

Workplace conflict can expose deeper problems that need to be addressed. Managers can watch for patterns (e.g. an uptick in absenteeism, increases in customer complaints and other conflict indicators) in the workplace and engage early with the involved staff before the workplace is disrupted by overt conflict.



2. Better Problem-Solving

The best ideas and solutions flow from healthy discussions involving a diversity of perspectives. It is not always easy when emotions are running high. Proactive organisations design conflict resolution and problem-solving processes before they are needed.

3. Healthy Relationships, Morale and Commitment

If staff feel comfortable raising differing views, concerns or complaints and they see that these are heard and respected by their peers and management then their relationships with each other and with the organization can be strengthened.

4. Improved Productivity

Late intervention in a conflict situation saps valuable time and energy. However, conflict that is handled well will free up people to focus on their jobs rather than tensions in the office which will lead to higher productivity, efficiency and effectiveness.

5. Personal Growth and Insight



Conflict situations can help us to learn more about ourselves and others. Much of the greatest organisational learning comes not from times of peace and prosperity, but from experiences of adversity within and external to an organisation.

Employees will be able to better resolve conflicts if they master the following skills:

- Recognise their dominant mode of behaviour in a conflict situation competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding or accommodating (Kilmann, 2011)
- Active listening
- Collaborative communication
- Asking questions
- Focussing on problems not people
- Negotiating interests and not positions
- Helping the other party save face
- Disarming obstructive tactics

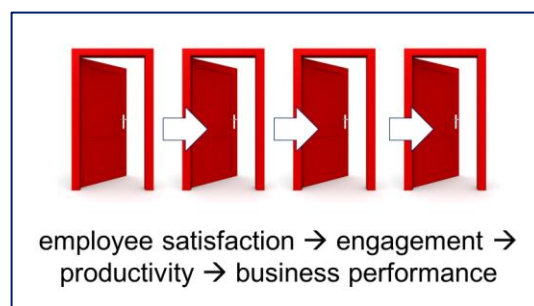
In order to be effective conflict resolvers, employees must know which conflict resolution process and approach is appropriate in a conflict situation, how to separate the problem from people, and aim to resolve conflict while preserving and enhancing long-term relationships. That is the recipe for successful and enduring interpersonal relationships which underpin every business enterprise.

Employee surveys

Key to informed HR decisions

Research shows that many employees around the world don't like their jobs. They don't like their bosses, their co-workers and or they feel disconnected from their teams. They don't feel recognised for the effort they put in, job security eludes them, they don't buy-in to the company's mission or culture. Or, any combination of these factors applies,

and employees are left unmotivated at work. On the other side of the coin, there are employees who are happy and satisfied at work, they relish the daily challenges their work presents and feel fulfilled and engaged. They will go the extra mile and take their organisations to new heights. It is through the efforts of these employees that organisations flourish. (Reynolds, 2019)



Reynolds unpacks the implications of unsatisfied employees further:

- Because unsatisfied workers don't like their jobs, it's impossible for them to become fully productive.
- Unsatisfied workers can become toxic over time, which could seriously hurt employee morale and pollute the work environment.
- Since unsatisfied workers show up to an office, they don't like every day, it's only a matter of time before they try to get a job somewhere else.
- Unsatisfied workers may take out their bad attitude on your customers, adversely affecting your brand's reputation and your bottom line.
- When your company has many unsatisfied workers on its payroll, it's next to impossible to attract top talent.

"It is not real work unless you would rather be doing something else."

JM Barrie

In this context, employers should take a deep interest in the levels of their



employees' job satisfaction, motivation, mood, morale and engagement. Employee surveys are a simple and effective tool for eliciting feedback on these important dimensions of organisation health. Crowell (online) notes that management can take meaningful action on what matters to people at work to gain the positive flow-on effects on things like performance, retention and innovation. Employee surveys collect employee feedback at scale. The results represent the collective voices of your employee base, rather than the loudest voices of a few people. Survey results are the basis for informed action on improving company culture or employees' experiences at work.

Employee surveys can only be effective if (1) They provide anonymity for participants. Employees tend to avoid confrontation, and surveys eliminate this factor – provided you use an electronic or 3rd party agency. (2) They facilitate honest and unbiased feedback. Employees will tell you how they really feel and can also offer new ideas to improve your business. An organisation must encourage candour and be prepared to deal with negative comments. (Bhat, online)

The success of an employee survey will depend on multiple factors, an important one being the technical skill applied in question formulation. Questions should only mention a single subject or construct; mean the same thing to all respondents; and, use words economically. Employee surveys should be run at least once per year.

Employee surveys should be in addition to, and not a substitute for: feedback from one-on-one performance conversations and other people status indicators including formal disputes, grievances, absenteeism, employee turnover, retention rates, employee suggestions, and overtime.

There are critics of employee surveys who argue against the application of Likert scales to record employee responses. Fuller (2014) states that survey data becomes dated quickly, there's availability bias from respondents thinking of only recent events, and potentially gamed results — people telling you what they think you want to hear rather than what they really think.

However, our view accords with the advantages of using a Likert Scale summarised by La Marca, N. (2011): they are the most universal method for survey collection, and easily understood

- the responses are easily quantifiable
- the scale does not require the participant to provide a simple and concrete yes or no answer, it does not force the participant to take a stand on a particular topic, but allows them to respond in a degree of agreement which makes question answering easier on the respondent
- the responses presented accommodate neutral or undecided feelings of participants
- Likert surveys are also quick, efficient and inexpensive methods for data collection.

“Statistics are a tool to enable investigators to think about the data, and ultimately, the population.”

Bishop and Herron

Implementing an employee survey allows organisations to reflect and act upon the employment experience of employees. As Bishop and Heron (2015) state “Statistics are a tool to enable investigators to think about the data, and ultimately, the population. Statistics are not a substitute for thinking about what data truly mean, and what data are showing about the population.” It is what you do with the information gathered from an employee survey that will determine its value.



Performance Management (Part 3)

Appraisal

Performance categories

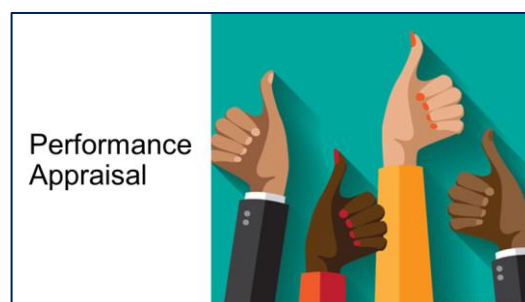
There has been a trend away from conventional ratings-based performance management systems. With their heavy emphasis on financial rewards and punishments and their end-of-year structure, conventional performance appraisals hold people accountable for past behaviour at the expense of improving current performance and grooming talent for the future, both of which are critical for organisations' long-term survival. (Cappelli and Tavis, 2016). Performance appraisals were generally experienced as time consuming and bureaucratic. Managers and employees alike did not trust the scores mainly because of the impact of subjective bias.

Two developments in appraising work performance, which we advocate are:

(1) Move from performance ratings to performance categories: focus the discussion on performance rather than rating scores by assigning employees into one of three categories: (a) not yet full performance, (b) effective performance, and (c) exceptional performance.

(2) Employee led performance assessment: Let employees lead performance discussions by asking rather than telling them how they are doing with their performance and goal setting. This is not an abdication of management responsibility. Managers still have the prerogative to make the call whether employees are performing acceptably. (Jacobs, 2010).

This approach of reversing the roles in performance discussions assigns performance ownership to the employee and effectively deals with the psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, which manifests in the employee rationalising or discounting negative feedback and blaming any poor performance on issues beyond the employee's control. Employees are expected to come to performance discussions ready to explain their performance achievements (or lack thereof) and the ways employees plan to overcome performance shortcomings. In this way, employees own their performance goals and the outcomes achieved. The manager's role shifts from performance driver to coach.



This is not a recipe for getting lowballed performance objectives. Management retains the prerogative to decide if the employee's own objectives and achievements are adequate. Holding an employee accountable for results is much easier when the employee has set the objectives and evaluated their own performance.

Another valuable contributor to effective performance appraisal is to involve peers in assessing performance: Make peers more powerful in the performance management process because people are more inclined to take input from peers seriously. In one reported case study, a company found that even though peer reviewers were not obliged to share their input with the person they were evaluating, more than two-thirds chose to do so. (Mohan, 2017).



When check-ins and coaching don't work?

When a performance standard is not met, the manager must immediately initiate a root cause analysis to uncover the obstacles preventing the employee from achieving agreed goals. The root cause of serious work performance problems can sometimes be traced back to supervisors or managers not dealing with issues while they were small. The causes of this may include a conflict avoidance management style, wishful thinking that a problem will self-correct, procrastination, and or a lack of skill in informal correction techniques.

A simple tool to get to the root cause of a work performance problem is known as '5 Whys'. You take the problem indicator and ask 'WHY?' several times. For example, "A credit controller missed his collection target." Ask WHY? To the first answer, ask WHY? And, to each successive answer ask WHY? By repeating this cycle of questioning the response it is very likely that you will need no more than five WHYS to get to the root cause of the problem. This ensures that you do not focus on symptoms but address root causes.

Once the root causes of under-performance have been determined, the manager, with the employee's input, must develop an action plan which the employee must follow to achieve the required performance standards. For any actions specified, an employee must have access to the resources necessary to achieve them.

When a performance gap persists; the size of the under-performance is big; an employee's performance is out of sync with peers; and / or an employee's under-performance poses a financial or similar risk to the organisation, then it is necessary to move from the standard performance management process into a formal poor work performance management process, which has four steps before dismissal of the employee

can be considered: (1) work performance counselling meeting, (2) follow-up, (3) final warning, and (4) poor work performance hearing. A manager must convey clearly to an employee that there is a process transition and dismissal is a possible outcome.

If an employee continues to underperform, despite a fair opportunity to meet performance standards, which are reasonable and known to the employee, and alternatives have been exhausted, then dismissal may be imposed.

Misconduct

Indicators of desertion

Desertion is a specific category of unauthorised absence characterised by an employee's intention to never return to work.



When investigating a case of an employee going AWOL, proof of it being desertion will include any of the following indicators, on their own or in conjunction (Strugnell, 2017):

- The employee's locker or desk is empty;
- The employee has just been paid his/her normal wages and annual bonus;
- The employee's co-workers don't know where he/she is. Or, the employee told his/her co-workers to not expect a return to work;
- The employee does not respond to a manager's efforts to contact him/her; and



- The employee no longer lives at the address you have for him/her.

The above list is not exhaustive. Unless it is clear cut desertion it is preferable to allege unauthorised absence for an unreasonable period in breach of the employment contract.

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Course details:

Date: 25 February 2020 | **Venue:** Tennant Human Capital Solutions, 59 Woodlands Avenue, Hurlingham Office Park, Block A Suite 3, Cnr. Republic & William Nicol Drive, Hurlingham Manor, Sandton | **Time:** 9:00 – 16:30 | **Cost:** R2'400 excluding VAT per person | **Facilitator:** Peter Fisher

Who should attend?

Managers, supervisors, team leaders, newly appointed junior managers, HR practitioners, project team members and management development candidates.

The conflict challenge:

No workplace is immune from conflict. Where it is not effectively dealt with, conflict can debilitate organisation performance. The course aims to give participants practical skills to effectively manage inevitable conflict by means other than avoidance, coercion and force.

Facilitator:

Peter Fisher, Executive HR Consultant, has a BSocSc Hons degree and more than 25 years' experience as HR Consultant, HR Manager and HR Director. Peter is passionate about implementing and facilitating development programmes which help employees realise their full potential at work. This in turn, is a building block for excellent business performance.

This is what some course participants have written about training programmes facilitated by Peter: 'He is very clear and delivers lessons simply and understandably.' ● Peter performed his function very well and especially encouraged participation from members of the class.' ● 'The manual is very useful – will keep this file safely for future referral.' ● 'The learning is very applicable.'

To book, contact Peter direct: 082 453 7034 | peter.fisher@tennant.co.za

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capital is that
which is
invested in
human beings**

- Alfred Marshall