

CONSULTANT'S CORNER THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT

Workplace conflict—situations in which people have incompatible goals, interests, principles, or feelings—is inevitable. It can also be disruptive. Studies show that managers typically devote more than a third of their time to dealing with conflict and its consequences. Unmanaged conflict accounts for some 65 percent of work-performance problems.

A NEW APPROACH TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The Conflict Dynamics Profile® (CDP) was created by the Leadership Development Institute at Eckerd College to help address conflict in the workplace. This 360° assessment tool, also available in a self-assessment version, focuses on specific behavioral responses to conflict. The ultimate goal is not to eliminate but to manage conflict, reducing the harmful impact and maximizing beneficial aspects such as problem solving and creativity.

The CDP measures the degree to which individuals display

- *constructive responses*—behaviors that move toward problem solving
- *destructive responses*—behaviors derived from fight-or-flight survival instincts that inflame or prolong conflict and make it personal
- *active and passive responses*—which can be either constructive or destructive

It also looks at

- *hot buttons*—behaviors in others that irritate or frustrate the individual enough to provoke conflict
- *the organizational/contextual perspective*—how the measured behaviors are regarded within the culture as potential career derailers

This high degree of behavioral specificity and the fact that it is available as a 360° assessment distinguish the CDP from the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). While the CDP gives feedback on real conflict behaviors, providing a concrete focus for change, the more general TKI simply provides individuals with an understanding of their stylistic approach to conflict: competitive, compromising, collaborative, accommodating, or avoiding.

A VITAL COMPONENT OF LEADERSHIP

Developed primarily for use in leadership development, the CDP is used by the Center for Creative Leadership® in its Foundations of Leadership Program to assess a vital component of leadership—conflict-resolution behaviors.

I recently worked with The Ayers Group to certify a dozen of its coaches in the use of this new instrument. As a result of the assessment, executives can see what triggers conflict for them and how they behave once conflict has begun. It helps them recognize areas of strength and weakness so they can

then work with a coach on a development plan. Because conflict management brings communications and interpersonal skills to bear in an extreme context, improvement of conflict-related responses tends to help executives develop those broader skill sets—something that carries over outside the workplace as well.

Although feedback from the assessment is normally given on a one-to-one basis, to ensure confidentiality, it can be helpful for individuals to share some observations—particularly about hot buttons. What triggers a destructive response in one person might not bother another at all, so people tend to be surprised when they learn about one another's triggers. "I never knew that bothered you!" And once they know, it's a whole different situation.

As a leadership development tool, the CDP can be used organization-wide or for small groups. In this application, it is receiving wide use with managers in U.S. and Canadian corporations and government agencies—often in tandem with the less involved self-assessment version for supervisors and lower-level employees. The versions share a common vocabulary and conceptual model, making them ideal for use together within an organization.

OTHER APPLICATIONS

Hospitals are using the CDP with nurses because conflict tends to arise during their shift changes, when complex information has to pass between individuals quickly and around interaction with doctors.

Tech companies have begun using the tool because people in engineering roles tend to be good at science and not as good at communicating and interacting.

Another application is intervention in situations where ongoing conflict is causing problems in a team or high-performance individual. In the case of a team, the contextual-perspective component of the tool becomes particularly important. The objective is not only to change the behavior of team members but also to get them to agree to new norms for dealing with conflict.

Alternative dispute-resolution professionals—mediators and conflict-management specialists—are adopting the CDP as a preventive measure, to address conflict early in the cycle before it becomes a dispute. ■

For more information about CDP and other 360° products and coaching services available through The Ayers Group, contact Joan Caruso, Managing Director, Organizational Effectiveness Consulting, at joan.caruso@ayers.com or 212.889.7788.

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