

## ***A Proactive Approach to Dealing with Conflict in Organizations***

Conflict is inevitable in business and relationships. How you manage it determines its impact on your company, yourself and your employees. At a recent Leadership Day in Frederick, Maryland, we asked an audience of 80, “how many of you experience conflict at work?” All 80 participants raised their hands. We then asked “how many of your organizations have a defined way to handle conflict, whether between two people, departments, offices or even clients, when it arises? **ONE** individual raised his hand! While conflict happens all the time, why do organizations and individuals avoid it ‘like the plague’?”

Most people and organizations find conflict uncomfortable and undesirable and think if they just don’t talk about it, it will go away. Our experience, and I’m sure yours as well, tells us that this is not true. While conflict can be uncomfortable, disruptive and often times, scary, the benefits of conflict, when handled well, outweigh the moments of discomfort. So how can conflict in organizations be handled well?

**First** and most importantly, organizational leaders need to clearly define how the organization handles conflict between individuals, teams, departments, offices (if multiple locations) and external contacts such as clients, vendors or strategic partners. Just like an organization has a policy for dealing with terminations, it should also have one for dealing with conflict. Key elements in a conflict policy include:

- Clear definition of what situations constitutes conflict
- The steps for handling conflict should it arise
- What to do if those steps don’t work

**Second**, organizational leaders should examine their beliefs around conflict. What we know is that our definition of and reaction to conflict originates from our experiences growing up in our family. While some families are comfortable with conflict, others avoid and silence it. How an organization deals with conflict is often a reflection of the leadership’s view of and reaction to conflict. Leadership’s clarity and defined approach to conflict creates a safe, motivating and productive organization.

**Third**, all employees should be trained on key communication skills including the power of non-verbal and verbal communication; giving and receiving feedback; avoiding triangles; and staying objective and managing reactions.

### *The Power of Non-Verbal and Verbal Communication*

It’s often not the words you use but how you say them or what your body language conveys that creates a reaction in others. Being congruent means that your words and non-verbal language match the intention of your communication.

### *Giving and Receiving Feedback*

How we give feedback and how we react to feedback being give to us impacts effective communications. Managers need to be trained on giving both positive and constructive feedback and employees need to be trained on how to receive and respond to feedback given. Organizations that spend time on these skills develop a culture of learning rather than one of fear, blaming and finger-pointing, and an 'us' vs. 'them' mentality.

### *Avoiding Triangles*

A communication triangle is created when an individual has an issue with someone and he/she, instead of going directly to that person, goes to other people to talk about that individual and/or issue. It often sounds like this – “Can you believe he said that?”, “Don’t you think it’s unfair that she did that?” Often viewed as ‘just getting it off my chest’, this type of interchange is unproductive and destructive to effective communication. All employees must be taught to engage in productive communication which starts with avoiding triangles and dealing directly with individuals with whom they have issues. WARNING: This is *the* most powerful shift an organization can make!!

### *Staying Objective and Managing Reactions*

Conflict often arises when an individual interprets or makes an assumption about another’s words or actions. Sometimes our interpretations or assumptions are accurate but most times, they are not. We assume by someone’s posture that they are upset and that it must be something I/we did. We interpret the words, ‘this needs to be done’, as an order, versus a request that needs clarification. The key to effective communication is to first recognize that another’s words or actions are not ‘truth’ but merely their response to a situation. Second, we have a choice in whether we react or not based on how emotionally involved we allow ourselves to be in the situation, and third, that the best response is to ‘check out’ the other person’s intention or ask for clarification on what was said or done. In the first example, one could say “you look upset, what’s going on?” In the second example, the best response would be “when you say it needs to be done, can you be more specific – are you asking me to do it or will other’s be involved? When specifically does it need to be done?”

Don’t kid yourself, conflict can and will occur when two or more individuals work together. Taking a proactive, defined approach to handling conflict in your organization and training employees on effective communication skills will shorten the length of time that conflict impacts employees and their productivity.

**Theresa Gale** is co-owner of Transform, Inc. Established in 1996, *Transform, Inc.’s powerful, cutting-edge approach to leadership, sales and client relationship management as well as organizational effectiveness has helped businesses across the country achieve maximum results. For more information, visit [www.transforminc.com](http://www.transforminc.com) or call 301-419-2835.*

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