

## HOW'S YOUR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM?

When conflicts at work happen, the folks involved respond within an organizational culture that influences the choices they see and ways they act. As a leader in your organization, you can strengthen people and save resources by analyzing and reforming your organization's conflict management system.

This system is the web of formal and informal communication that determines how the organization and the people in it deal with conflict. Very likely this conflict management system has, like a field of dandelions, grown up without a lot of planning. Here are some weeds to watch for.

**Look for inconsistency between policy and practice.** In an organization I visited recently, written policy says employees will first try to work out problems with each other. The organization is trying to be responsible by writing such a policy that obliges legal requirements. The trouble is, real life doesn't reflect what's on the books. Managers told me they don't even agree among themselves about how to respond to the situations policies are meant to address. Naturally, their employees' responses are also inconsistent.

**What results?** Taking initiative to intervene feels risky. Some folks remain oblivious to problems; others ignore them. Still others live with unresolved conflicts, and their morale suffers. I could see the toll in the managers I talked to. Finally, open communication gives way to mistrust as folks ask themselves, "whom can I confide in? Whom can I trust?"

**Watch the extend to which your system defers conflicts to "higher authority."** One of my clients has, until recently, depended upon a formal grievance procedure to handle employee complaints. Even as they try to make some changes, several thousand old grievances clog this organization's system.

**What results?** People simply endure or, discouraged by the system's option, they try to swallow their differences. When there is no precedent or model for working things out face-to-face, people are not as direct and responsive.

**Be skeptical about avoidance as a tactic or solution.** I think of the folks in one non-profit who have not dealt directly with complaints. Clients have fallen away, of course, and so has support money for the organization.

A strong conflict management system is consistent throughout the layers of the organization. It encourages employees to first take initiative, with a choice to either seek advice or approach the other parties directly. "Higher authority," such as deferring to management, binding arbitration or legal procedures, is used as a backup system only.

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## ***Keeping Up To Date***

This month I complete the 7-week Masters level training for the Vermont Quality Council.

The Council teaches organizations how to follow the Baldrige Criteria for assessing and improving quality. The Baldrige Criteria stress achieving quality across the whole organization, including the leadership, strategic vision, process management, human resources and information systems.

Knowing the Baldrige Criteria helps me to assess your organization from a whole-system perspective and assist you with continuous learning.

Contact the Vermont Quality Council (802 655 1910) for more information.

## ***A client writes...***

"Merryn showed us how we can become proactive in settling disputes. Her winning steps can be applied ... with other employees, in labor-management discussions, and in the grievance procedure itself."

Margo Coy, President  
American Postal Workers Union, VT