MANAGING CONFLICT

Conflict is inevitable.

So say all the experts. Conflict happens when two or more parties in a social system depend on one another, they both feel they have the right to limited resources or course of action, and those involved can interfere with the goals of the others.

Sounds a bit academic, right?

In other words, differences in our points of view mean that we are bound to disagree on some issues and conflict of some kind will occur as a result.

Let's take a practical example to clarify.

What's the problem?

During an economic downturn, a company's managers have decided to allocate only a small part of the reserve budget to support services, because they need to spend more on product development to improve products and compete in a difficult market. The human resources (HR) and marketing departments have to make a presentation which will convince the managers that this is the right department get the money.

HR wants more money for psychological testing, because choosing the right people for the company will ensure that the business is more profitable. However, the marketing department wants more money for advertising, because finding the right customers for the company will ensure that the business is more profitable. Sharing equally will not allow either HR or marketing to achieve their goals, because both testing and advertising are expensive.

Who is right? Both of them are right, of course! Better people will improve company performance, and more customers will bring in more money.

How do we sort this out?

The fight

Let's start by examining the problem. According to the definition, we have a clear conflict: HR and marketing are both in the same social system (company), interdependent (one finds people for the other, one advertises the products that bring money for the other), there are very limited resources (budget), if either gets what they want, they interfere with the goals of the other (can't do what they want!).

This is what is known as intergroup conflict, and you probably know it from your own organisation. As the date for the presentation draws closer, the conflict may escalate (become more serious). In this case, there may be "we-they" thinking, where HR people do not like marketing, and marketing does not like HR; HR says marketing people "use basic psychology that any idiot knows", marketing says HR is "common

sense"; since sales are down, HR says that marketing is not doing their job properly, and because a few new hires have left the company, marketing thinks HR doesn't know how to choose good people effectively. If the conflict goes on long enough, they might start calling each other idiots, not sending information important to each other, being disruptive in meetings.

None of this is conducive to working effectively as time and energy are spent belittling or disrupting the other group or dealing with the stress involved.

Wave a magic wand, and…

There is no magic involved. Experts agree that there must be some kind of negotiation involved. In other words, positive rather than negative communication.

Before anything happens, both parties must agree to discuss it and be open to options. As the old joke goes: "How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the lightbulb has to want to change." Without co-operation, nothing is going to ease the conflict.

According to Thomas, there are 5 basic ways to handle conflict. Firstly, *avoidance* just ignores the whole situation. But this implies no negotiation, so let's leave that. *Accommodation* and *competition* allows either HR or marketing to get their own way at the expense of the other, so let's leave those. *Compromise* involves give-and-take from each party, but can leave a bitter taste because neither HR nor marketing will be totally satisfied, and may result in conflicts re-igniting later.

Really *collaboration* is the only viable alternative, where marketing and HR work together to build a long-term, creative solution that satisfies both. It takes more time, but will greatly improve the quality of the solution and their commitment to it. It also removes the "win-lose" mentality of the other approaches and encourages a more "win-win" way to do things.

Coming to agreement: yes!

One way to reduce and (ultimately) eliminate conflict is to collaborate using principled negotiation. There are four basic steps in this approach.

1. *People:* separate the people from the problem.
Realise that the relationship between HR and marketing is going to continue and it will be easier for everybody if that relationship is congenial and not acrimonious. Problems will occur from time to time in any relationship and it is up to the participants to solve them equitably.

2. *Interests:* focus on interests, not positions.
If HR says they want the money, that is a position. If marketing says they need the money, that is a position. Look more at why they want the money: what are their goals? Each party wants to do something with the money to help the company be

more successful. In that way, their interests are actually the same. Already they agree on something!

3. *Options:* invent options for mutual gain
Both HR and marketing will have to meet to brainstorm options and select solutions that help both parties. Is there some way to achieve their goals without the money, or with less money? Is there some way they could work together with the same money? This will require creativity and commitment to co-operation.

4. *Criteria:* insist on objective criteria
Both parties need to use objective data when making their case (psychological testing costs money, but not everybody charges the same; marketing also costs money, but there are many cheap and cost-efficient marketing methods that are very effective).

The emotional dimension

A lot of people think that negotiation and conflict resolution happens in a vacuum. But in reality, it involves real people who all have feelings that affect their thought and behaviour. In our example, HR and marketing are probably angry with each other, and even somewhat frightened of the ultimate outcome of their conflict.

Traditionally, negotiators have been trained to control their emotions and avoid expressing feelings. Today, research shows that emotion can have both positive and negative effects on conflict and how it is handled.

However, screaming and yelling doesn't help. Expressing emotion calmly, but explaining clearly what it is and where it comes from can highlight the real issues in a negotiation and help those in conflict to work towards a solution where anger and fear have been eliminated. This honesty will also develop trust, which is essential in any functional relationship.

Summary and Conclusion

The nature of human society means that we are bound to disagree with others on some topic that is important to us. So conflicts are inevitable.

There is no magic solution to resolving conflict. All those involved need to be committed to collaborating on a mutually-agreeable solution. Principled negotiation works towards win-win and takes a logical, rational approach, working towards a mutually-agreeable solution. It requires objectivity, strong creativity, and time.

However, emotions should not be ignored. Ideally, they should be expressed honestly in order to enhance understanding and develop trust.

There is a lot to negotiation and conflict resolution and this article has only just touched the tip of the iceberg. You will notice I have not come up with a solution to our HR-marketing dilemma: that should be left up to the participants. It's easy to talk about, but it can be more difficult in practice.

You might like to look at the links below for some more thoughts on the issues involved.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Resolving conflict at Mind Tools
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm

Conflict Resolution Network – lots of free resources
http://www.crnhq.org/

Conflict resolution at work
http://humanresources.about.com/od/conflictresolution/Conflict_Resolution_Conflict_Avoidance_and_Controversy_Management.htm

Next time, we will be discussing a very particular kind of workplace conflict that has become rather prevalent in recent years: bullying.

Further reading:

Dick, B. (1986). *Learning to communicate.* Chapel Hill, QLD: Interchange.

Eggert, M.A., & Falzon, W. (2004). *Managing conflict pocketbook.* Alresford, Hampshire, UK: Management Pocketbooks.

Osland, J.S., Kolb, D.A., Rubin, I.M., & Turner, M.E. (2007). *Organizational behaviour: An experiential approach* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Thomas, K.W. (1976). "Conflict and conflict management", in M.D. Dunnette (ed.)., *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*, Chicago: Rand McNally, pp. 889-935.