



AVOIDING CONFLICT CAN OFTEN CAUSE CONFLICT

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By Tara Carr, Small Business Development Director at UW-Green Bay

When mentoring young managers, typically the most difficult skill to develop is dealing with conflict AND having the conflict result in a positive outcome. Silent approval or conflict avoidance tends to contribute to employee conflict, but also intensifies the situation. These managers/leaders will either ignore the conflict or refuse to engage in the situation. Managers being non-committal, withdrawn, ignoring, or sidestepping the person or problem can execute the conflict avoidance. Rather than deal with the problem, by evading or delaying the confrontation becomes a lose-lose situation for both parties.

Although conflict management is a difficult skill to develop, it is essential that managers and leaders master the skill emotionally and professionally. Conflict is not bad! Fear of authority, gender stereotypes, different viewpoints, intimidation, and lack of confidence are all factors that contribute to why individuals avoid conflict. The fear of the repercussion or anxiety of another person's response to addressing the conflict can be so overwhelming that the manager avoids the situation. The painful thought of dealing with the anticipated response is too painful to address and resolve.

Conflict can arise from a variety of sources: incompatible goals or priorities, personality differences, scarcity of resources, different communications styles and differing core values. According to a study by CPP Inc., employees spend over 2 hours a week involved with conflict. The inability for managers to effectively manage conflict and bring about positive resolution results in a loss of one full day of productivity per month, which is two and a half weeks per year. According to the report "Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Thrive," the following statistics demonstrate how pervasive conflict is in the workplace:

- ◆ 85 percent of employees deal with conflict on some level
- ◆ 29 percent of employees deal with it almost constantly
- ◆ 34 percent of conflict occurs among front-line employees
- ◆ 49 percent of conflict is a result of personality clashes and "warring egos"
- ◆ 34 percent of conflict is caused by stress in the workplace
- ◆ 33 percent of conflict is caused by heavy workloads
- ◆ 27 percent of employees have witnessed conflicts lead to personal attacks
- ◆ 25 percent of employees have seen conflict result in sickness or absence

Research has shown that employees recognize the critical need for conflict management skills at work. The study found that 70 percent of employees believe managing conflict is a crucially important leadership skill. Moreover, 54 percent of employees believe managers could handle differences more effectively by dealing with underlying tensions immediately when they occur.

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Conversely, avoidance can be constructive and appropriate, especially during an emotionally charged situation. Weighing in the right time, right place and the potential benefit of the outcome, along with having the right information, are all factors to consider when balancing constructive avoidance versus negative conflict avoidance. Managers should not respond on emotion, as they should make decisions with a level head and big picture approach. To be an effective leader, while taking into account of delaying conflict avoidance in isolated situations, the majority of conflict needs to be addressed in a timely manner. Although embracing conflict may be difficult, whether personally or professionally, respect is earned by acting responsibly. Leadership is about action. Avoiding conflict by creating the false appearance of harmony is a shortsighted perspective that diminishes trust and will soon turn into chaos. Managers and leaders can maintain the respect and effectiveness of those they take action and lead by having those tough conversations.

The Wisconsin Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay is part of a statewide network of SBDCs working with business owners and entrepreneurs to facilitate business growth and improvement, and to launch successful new companies. The Small Business Development Center offers a variety of services: no-cost business consulting, customized business solutions, financial management, growth & strategic planning, and professional development training.