Managing Conflict

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Conflict is inevitable. Whenever two or more people work together, there will be conflict. The manager’s challenge is how to manage the conflict not how to avoid it. Conflict may lead to improved relations and solutions to problems, i.e. be positive. On the other hand, conflict may destroy relationships and cause additional problems, i.e., be negative. Working to avoid, bury or deny conflict results in continuation of its underlying causes. Conflict can continue indefinitely to be unresolved. The underlying causes of conflict often hinge on perceptions rather than facts. Thus, conflict may be the unrecognized root cause of failure to resolve a problem. The challenge is to manage conflict in a way that it turns a problem into an opportunity for improvement.

The following guidelines for conflict management are based on the widely recognized authoritative book on conflict management titled, *Getting to Yes – Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* by Roger Fisher and William Ury, Penguin Books (ISBN 01401.57352). The guidelines are intended to outline some key principles that managers can use to start analyzing their usual ways of addressing conflict. These guidelines center on the basic premise for successful conflict management – collaborating to resolve conflict is more successful than battling over the conflict.

1. Guidelines for collaboration
   - Don’t bargain over **POSITIONS**.
   - Separate the **PEOPLE** from the problem.
   - Focus on **INTERESTS**, not positions
   - Invent **OPTIONS** for mutual gain.
   - Insist on using objective **CRITERIA**

2. Basic strategies in negotiating
   - **Win/Lose** → You demand significant concessions from the “opponent” to resolve conflict.
   - **Lose/Win** → You make significant concessions to the “opponent” in order to resolve conflict.
   - **Win/Win** → You and the other party arrive at alternatives that meet the needs of both sides without requiring onerous concessions from either side.
3. Don’t bargain over **POSITIONS**
   - Produces unwise agreements, i.e., each party perceives the outcome as lose/win
   - Is inefficient because the parties to the conflict often fail to consider its underlying causes.
   - Endangers an ongoing relationship because of the lose/win conclusion
   - Being nice to the other party by giving in is no answer

4. Separate the **PEOPLE** from the problem
   - Negotiators are people first
   - Negotiators have both substance and relationship interests
   - Deal directly with the people problem
   - Consider perceptions, emotions and communication barriers

5. Focus on **INTERESTS**, not positions
   - Reconcile interests, not positions
   - Seek to understand the other person’s interests and emotions
   - Ask “Why?”
   - Ask “Why not?”
   - Be hard on the problem, soft on the people

6. Invent **OPTIONS** for mutual gain
   - Be creative
   - Broaden the options beyond the obvious and unimaginative
   - Brainstorm
   - Consider unusual, nontraditional and even surprising options
   - Look for mutual gain
   - Make the other person’s decision easy

7. Insist on using objective **CRITERIA**
   - Fair standards
   - Fair procedures
   - Reason and be open to reason
   - Never yield to pressure