

MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

I. KEY CONCEPTS

1. All conflict can be thought of as a question (or series of questions) in search of an answer (or multiple answers).
2. To solve for an answer one must apply sound problem-solving skills.
3. As a process, problem-solving involves: a) understanding the presenting problem as well as possible, b) identifying what's "known" (or knowable) about the problem, c) identifying what's "unknown" (or unknowable) about the problem, d) generating hypotheses about possible solutions to the problem, e) testing one's hypotheses through research and/or personal investigation (e.g. via testimony from relevant witnesses, external experts or applicable informational resources), and e) forming evidence-based conclusion(s).*
4. To successfully solve for interpersonal conflict one must apply the problem-solving process in a manner that emphasizes objectivity. In other words, one must refrain from making unfounded assumptions about either the presenting problem or the "facts" gathered through investigation. One must also refrain from acting on unsupported hypotheses (this is the same as saying, "don't jump to conclusions").
5. In most cases, the solution to a problem will reveal itself over the course of investigation. Simply setting oneself on a course for objective inquiry will prevent unnecessary assumptions and open the door to likely solutions.

II. ACTION STEPS

1. Isolate the occurrence of conflict as soon as possible.
2. Interview each of the disputing parties individually-- never together.
3. Ask that the disputing parties not communicate their issues with co-workers unless absolutely necessary (this will limit gossip and, in time, curb idle speculation).
4. If necessary, limit the possibility of contact between disputing parties. If assigned to work areas in proximity to one another, move the parties to sites sufficiently distant to one another. If duties are shared or interdependent, try changing duties temporarily or making agreements with one another about how shared responsibilities are to be handled-- if warranted, do this at the time of initial interview.
5. Don't make assumptions about who is "right" or "wrong."
6. Be wary of tendency to favor, or be perceived as favoring, one employee over another.
7. Begin your inquiry into the facts of the dispute as soon as possible
8. Identify if there has been a violation of policy or state/federal law. If there has been, be sure to share the matter with the proper authorities as soon as possible (in the case of violations of university policy, contact the UCDHS Office of Employee & Labor Relations or the UCDHS Office of Equal Opportunity, Mediation and Sexual Harassment).
9. If no significant violation has occurred, proceed with your inquiry with the understanding that the solution should be low-level and generally within the purview of the department.
10. If attempts at intervention at the departmental level do not result in meaningful resolution, contact the UCDHS Mediation Services Program (916-734-5335) to either identify additional strategies or set up a professional mediation opportunity.

* Problem-solving steps adapted for use here from: G. Polya, "How to Solve It", 2nd ed., Princeton University Press, 1957, ISBN 0-691-08097-6.