ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Greg Giesen

All too often organizations cry out for what I call the *quick fix*. You know the scenario: two employees not getting along, probably personality differences, not real receptive to previous internal interventions, etc., so the organization decides to bring in outside help to fix the problem. Sound familiar?

I call it the *quick fix* because the conflict between the two employees may also be a symptom of a much larger organizational problem, or, as I like to call it, a system malfunction. In this scenario, a system malfunction can be a direct result of poor leadership, dysfunctional work groups, inadequate performance management processes and/or a general lack of soft skills training and resources for employees on the part of the organization.

Now don't get me wrong. It is very important to address the actual conflicts between employees and to help them reach acceptable resolutions, etc. However, it would be a mistake for an organization to limit the scope of a conflict resolution to the immediate conflicting employees without also being willing to look at the surrounding system where the conflict resides. Without a more thorough assessment, an organization can easily get into the habit of treating the symptom while ignoring the problem.

In order to assess if there are organizational factors that are contributing to the conflict(s), consider investigating the following checkpoints:

Checkpoint 1: Is adequate leadership within the organization and department being demonstrated?

The leader (i.e., supervisor/manager) of the employees in conflict is the first place to check to assess whether the conflict is a symptom of a bigger problem or merely an isolated event. Things to look for include:
- What previous efforts have been made by the leader to address the conflict and with what results?
- Is the leader comfortable with conflict resolution?
- Is the leader role-modeling effective conflict resolution skills?
- What has the leader done to create a supportive environment within their group for effective conflict resolution?
- Is the leader consistent in how he/she addresses conflicts?

- Is the leader being held accountable by their supervisor in effectively addressing conflict resolution issues in their area?
- Are effective conflict resolution skills being practiced by the CEO and his/her senior management team?

The leadership factor is the most important predictor of how conflict will be handled within a given department and/or organization. If a supervisor/manager is ineffective in handling conflict, it is possible that their supervisor/manager may not be providing adequate coaching or guidance to them. If not, the problem has now expanded to the next level of leadership. Sometimes this can be traced all the way up to the CEO.

Checkpoint 2: Do co-workers/team members foster a supportive environment for conflict resolution or a non-supportive environment?

In my opinion, the co-workers/team members (including those directly involved in the conflict) must also share the responsibility for the interpersonal dynamics (good and bad) that occur within their own group. Hence, here are some of the things to look for:
- What previous efforts have been made by individuals or the group to address the conflict and with what results?
- What are the defined or undefined group norms around conflict, if at all?
- Who is impacted by the conflict in question?
- What isn't happening that needs to happen in this group around conflict resolution?
- How does the group, as well as the conflicting parties, see the role of the leader in all of this. Effective? Ineffective? What guidance and support does the group feel they still need from the leader and the organization?

Of course the leader, as mentioned, is critical in creating a supportive environment for effective conflict resolution but that does not let the group or the conflicting individuals off the hook. There needs to be a collaborative effort in this process.

Checkpoint 3: Is there an accountability factor in the organization that supports teamwork and good communication skills?

The organization itself plays a critical role in defining appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in the workplace. Clearly, what gets reinforced is the behavior that gets exhibited. Specifically:
- Are the desired conflict resolution skills (particularly around teamwork and communication) reflected as criteria in the performance review process?

- Are there organizational core values? If so, are they reflected within the performance review process?
- Are department or team norms identified and established around conflict resolution? If so, are they followed in a consistent manner?
- Is peer input part of the performance review process? If not, would it make a difference?
- Is the disciplinary process ever used for employees who exhibit poor communication and/or cooperation skills?

The performance review/management process must reflect the desired skill sets required for effective conflict resolution. Here I'm talking about teaming skills, communication and problem-solving, collaborative and listening skills, to name a few. If organizations fail to acknowledge and create accountability around these types of skills amongst their employees, then those same organizations are contradicting themselves when they say they want to create an environment that fosters effective communication and conflict resolution.

Checkpoint 4: Is the organization (at all levels) providing soft skill training/resources on an ongoing basis?

Maintaining effective working relationships is ongoing work. This can only occur with a proactive philosophy instead of a reactive philosophy when it comes to effective communication and conflict resolution skills. One way to do this is to provide adequate soft skill training and resources for all employees (and I'm not talking about once every five years). Here is what to look for:
- What soft skill training opportunities are made available to all employees within the organization?
- How often are opportunities made available to employees to better themselves both personally and professionally?
- What resources are made available to employees to help in the area of interpersonal communication, teamwork and conflict resolution?
- From an organizational standpoint, what isn't happening that needs to happen in order for the conflict resolution process to be improved?
- Are leaders/managers/supervisors provided ongoing training and development to better themselves, especially in the soft skills area?

Proficiency in the soft skills area requires time, effort and practice. Unless organizations are willing to provide opportunities for their employees to grow and develop in these areas, it will be difficult to empower these same employees to effectively resolve their own conflicts, with or without the help of their respective supervisors.

So what does this all mean?
If any one of the four checkpoints above is suspect within a given organization, there's a pretty good chance that the conflicts that arise within those organizations will be symptoms of a bigger system malfunction. If two or more of the checkpoints are lacking within an organization, the organization itself is where the help is most needed.

So the next time there is a conflict within your organization, be sure to investigate whether the conflict is an isolated event or a system malfunction in need of attention. You might be surprised by what you find.