

Business

RECONCILING YIN AND YANG **Managing conflict in the workplace**

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Mediation skills are a powerful managerial tool

Managers have many roles. Effectively leading a team of subordinates means they must play director, instructor, motivator, disciplinarian and role model.

One role that is often overlooked, but is arguably among the most crucial to a team's productivity, is that of a mediator in times of internal conflict. If a manager is able to understand and master the skills of mediation, it could prove to be one of the most powerful managerial tools in his or her arsenal.

Conflict: friend or foe?

Diversity is widely accepted these days as a strategy that, if managed well, can lead to exponentially higher results. The ultimate aim of putting together a dynamic team consisting of individuals with distinct personalities and traits is to achieve richness in views and ideas, from which the most surprising solutions can spring.

However, friction is highly likely at the confluence of differing views from different individuals. Conflict is in fact a natural product of diversity. But it is a much-maligned social phenomenon, usually associated with feelings of discord, disregard, isolation, and in some cases, despair. These feelings can arise within a group if conflict is poorly managed. In these cases, negative emotions triggered by conflict compound the situation by adding tension, blurred judgement, aggression or passivity, and ultimately even more conflict.

In reality, conflict is an essential part of organisational progress. Without it, stagnation could become a big enemy. It is through conflict that problems are observed, and through gaps in current practices that innovative ideas are inspired.

Dealing with unmanaged conflict in everyday situations is not an easy skill to acquire. However, much can be learnt from the classical philosophy that sprang from early Eastern thinking.

The concept of Yin and Yang has been perpetuated by many aspects of Eastern culture and philosophy. Essentially, it can be described as the contention between two opposing forces, for example, day and night, or hot and cold. Yin needs Yang as much as Yang needs Yin.

Similar parallels can be drawn in the workplace and in relationships between individuals in general. Conflict emerges when individuals have their values or viewpoints challenged. When unchecked negative feelings arise from this friction, it is a manager's responsibility to step in and help colleagues-at-war to put aside their differences and work together.

Because people react differently in stressful situations, there is no single cure-all or set of step-by-step pointers that can be used effectively on every occasion. However, instead of simply generating solutions, a mediator should focus on setting the stage for resolution to take place. The best outcome is one where the parties involved are able to reach common ground of their own accord.

Here are a few ways in which mediators can turn potentially ugly situations into fertile ground for positive interaction.

Communicate

Communication is the fundamental structure upon which human relations are built. When it comes to resolving conflict, communication is crucial to reconciling divided perceptions. It is not simply a matter of having employees wait their turn to speak. As mediators, managers should actively reframe the points offered by each side so that there is mutual understanding.

Collaborate

Bonds are strengthened through shared victory. By reframing a problem into a common challenge, conflicting parties may eventually appreciate each other for their individual strengths. But collaboration between people who have existing reservations about one another has an equal potential to exacerbate tensions. Therefore it is crucial for managers to regulate and observe interactions so that negative emotions can be kept at bay on the road to achieving synergy.

Compromise

Just as some situations can be resolved, others are better left in the past. In instances where the grievances cannot be assuaged, mediators should look for ways in which conflicting parties can achieve a win-win situation, even if the achievement is less substantial than hoped.

Compete

Games and sports are based on the understanding that fair competition brings out positive human qualities such as striving for excellence, respect and friendship. In the same way, conflict is sometimes best resolved by simply fighting it out. A mediator's responsibility is to play the referee, setting the rules and boundaries of friendly competition and ensuring that all parties accept the outcome without harbouring any resentment.

Be the bigger person

Among all the functions of a manager, mediation is probably the toughest to perform

well. It requires an acute sense of justice as well as sensitivity to a host of human feelings and expectations and consequent behaviour. Since it is not simply a one-to-one affair, it demands respect for equality, with the same consideration being given to each employee involved.

Despite its difficulty, the role of mediator is one in which all managers should strive to excel, because it could mean the difference between a team that is dynamically dangerous and a team that is productively dynamic. The trick lies in getting both Yin and Yang to realise that their differences are really nothing to get worked up about.

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