Constructing a Conflict Resolution Program for Health Care

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Abstract: Resolving conflict throughout organizations requires a programmatic infrastructure and a committed management team. Leaders must recognize the need to approach conflict by building a format for learning, creating and managing an effective conflict management program. Careful attention to the elements of design and the stages of development can make all the difference in building a sustainable and useful conflict management approach.

Building conflict-managing communities requires a disciplined and specific approach to conflict processes within the health care organization. The first article of this two-part series focused on the individual's leadership role and how to handle conflict. This article explores how to construct a conflict resolution program for health care organizations to ensure that conflict management becomes part of the operational processes.

All conflict is normative. Conflict is fundamental to the human experience and is a requisite of all human interaction. Conflict is simply the recognition and subsequent expression of differences in human relationships. With this understanding, the leader begins to acknowledge in his or her own leadership role the essential skill set that reflects the key elements of good conflict management. Once the leaders understand how to apply conflict management skills in their roles, they must clearly articulate the essential structural characteristics of conflict management as a day-to-day imperative of the organization.

**CONSTRUCT A DEVELOPMENTAL FORMAT FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

The first step is to develop conflict-based educational processes. These developmental activities should engage all workers in the health care enterprise in both understanding and applying basic conflict principles in the course of their own individual work and as fundamental to problem solving in the organization. Incorporate a conflict education program into the ongoing continuing education format of the organization. Just as cardiopulmonary resuscitation is a basic skill expectation for every health care worker, conflict resolution processes should also be a basic skill and work expectation for every employee. Include the following curriculum items in the basic education program:

1. Fundamental elements of conflict and the concept of conflict as a normative part of human interaction and communication.
2. The elements of the dynamic of conflict and the characteristics of conflict as a part of the expression of human differences.
3. The basic elements of the conflict resolution process with the stages and steps of conflict identified in a systematic problem-solving format.
4. The structure and mechanics of the organization's organized conflict resolution process including

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5. A clear understanding of the systematic approaches to addressing and resolving conflict as a part of the organization’s mechanism for doing business and for resolving issues between the organization and employees, between the management and employees, and between employees and other employees.

Organized and structured conflict resolution processes within an organization should be directed to address conflicts and disputes on issues related to productivity, absentee policies and practices, quality of work life, sexual harassment, work rules, discrimination, and employee discipline and termination processes. Although conflict resolution processes are not limited to these employee and organizational concerns, they do form the foundation for most conflict resolution needs within an organizational construct. Building a formal process that incorporates issues associated with these concerns helps to more adequately address them as they unfold. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has documented a backlog of more than 100,000 conflict charges filed by employees as early as 1997 up from 46,000 charges in 1991. Bringing conflict resolution processes to the workplace, especially the health care workplace, provides a significant opportunity to anticipate and to address issues that would otherwise require other, sometimes more costly, approaches to their resolution. The American Arbitration Association has reported that between 1997 and 1999 alternative dispute resolution programs calling for their services (mediation and arbitration) have been implemented by more than 500 large companies in the United States. Whereas litigation has increased at the same time as alternative dispute resolution strategies, popularity of litigation as an approach to conflict resolution has declined. Researchers have identified various implications and positive outcomes of effective and well-organized conflict management programs. Outcomes suggested include an improved and positive atmosphere that supports the discussion of conflict and reduces stress, reduced conflict-related health problems, increased perceptions of fairness and job satisfaction, increased prosocial behaviors, and fewer incidents of aggressive behaviors (e.g., employee theft and litigation). These documented benefits of conflict management resolution processes are clear indicators that an organized approach to conflict resolution benefits both individuals and organizations.

**BUILD A CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

Effective conflict resolution models are key to successful conflict management programs. Models should address both structural and process issues associated with resolving organizational and interpersonal conflict. Although conflict management processes are valuable, a supportive infrastructure for conflict management will help to sustain conflict resolutions dynamics within the health care organization. This infrastructure creates an operational mandate and subsequent format for conflict management to become the preferred way to address work issues.

**HUMAN RESOURCE POLICY AND PROGRAM SUPPORT**

A conflict resolution program requires organizational commitment at every level of the health care system. This commitment needs to be exemplified in management structures and processes. A policy framework creates a format for conflict processes and programs to unfold appropriately. In addition to establishing a policy framework, the human resource function of the organization should establish an administrative and executive commitment to the conflict management program and to communicate appropriate processes at every level of the organization. This executive commitment is exemplified by the following questions:

1. Is there an administrative mandate that makes conflict resolution processes an important part of the management and leadership expectations of the organization?
2. Does the executive team’s own practices and behavior exemplify a personal commitment to conflict resolution dynamics within their own spheres of influence and across the organization?
3. Do executives regularly exemplify in their own leadership practices the conflict resolution processes expected of all persons in the organization as a fundamental part of their conflict resolution strategies.

**Human Resource Program Leadership**

- Executive program of support for initiative
- Elements of good conflict program design
- Development of organization-wide conflict education
- Delineation of resource commitment for conflict program
- Staging the implementation of conflict program
- Education program for employee mediators
- Evaluation process for conflict program and process
3. Implement the stages of conflict resolution processes represented in the following key areas:

1. Establish a policy mandate for conflict resolution processes and expect leadership to model effective conflict resolution from the Chief Executive Officer to the first-line manager.

2. Ensure that the executive team discerns and constructs a conflict resolution model appropriate to the structure and dynamics of the organization and determines how it will unfold throughout the organization.

3. Implement the stages of conflict resolution processes within the context of a programmatic approach to conflict resolution throughout the organization.

4. Define and apply within the executive team a developmental program that incorporates the essential skills of conflict resolution to both exemplify executive commitment and develop fundamental skills in the conflict resolution process.

5. Define and support a design and implementation plan including model development, performance expectations, implementation, and a timeline for completion as a part of creating the infrastructure for an organization-wide conflict resolution program.

It is important for human resource leaders to understand their responsibility for managing conflict management processes throughout the organization. The relationship of policies and expectations within an organization is challenged and often confronted directly when conflict resolution strategies shift decision-making roles and processes. Undertake significant dialogue with regard to the implications and the mechanisms involved in empowering the workforce to confront issues directly in their own settings. This shift signifies a major commitment from the executives to move much of problem solving and solution seeking to the point of service. This contextual shift in addressing problems—moving the locus of control, investing decisions in employee stakeholders, and resolving problems as close to the point of origin as possible—reflects for many a major new organizational dynamic. To successfully develop this new approach to problem resolution, undertake a complete review of relational, interactional, grievance, and employee compliance problems, programs, and policies and practices. To successfully implement a system-wide conflict management program, policies and practices will need to be updated to reflect this shift in the structure and format of decision making related to conflict resolution.

Leadership development at all levels of the organization should include dialogue around shifts in policies and practices requiring employee engagement. This new level of engagement in conflict resolution changes the nature of the relationship between employees and the workplace, managers and employees, and employees’ ownership of their own problem solving. The human resource office requires managers to fully understand the practical and applied implications of shifting behaviors, practices, and the model of organization problem-solving necessary to support staff involvement.

### Structural and Programmatic Elements

At the earliest point of design, a programmatic framework must reflect a commitment to building viable infrastructure by which conflict resolution activities can unfold as a regular part of the operation of the health care organization. Building this programmatic infrastructure requires a staging of efforts that will result in an ongoing program of employee-based conflict resolution. Once performance adjustments and shifts in operating constructs originate at the executive level of the organization and are facilitated by the human resource department conflict model construction, leaders should identify these five major structural components:

1. A programmatic model for conflict resolution operating throughout the organization.
2. The approved issues and topics that are subject to the conflict resolution program.
3. Skills and competencies necessary for mediators operating in the conflict resolution program.
4. Stages of the conflict resolution process and activities associated with them.
5. Legitimacy and legality, procedural appeal, expectations, and documentation processes associated with a conflict resolution program.

Because of the complexity of model design and the need for consistency and integrity in model development across the organization, the human resource leaders should clearly detail the elements of structure and process associated with conflict resolution. Employee conflict processes reap many benefits when designed with appropriately educated employee mediators and a process that serves the greatest good of the organization and those attempting to resolve human conflict.

The focus on education and development is a cornerstone of the design and application of an effective program. Education and development require different processes from a variety of locations within the system, however. In addition, the requisites for education will vary depending on who is engaged in the system. Although content and skill education are required for all levels of the organization, additional specific requirements for educational programming will be differentiated based on role expectations in the conflict management program. Senior leadership must emphasize for themselves education related to programmatic expectations,
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This requisite means that skilled mediation must be available at a convenient place and time for the user. It is essential to have sufficiently trained individuals on staff at all times to create a viable program. In the conflict resolution process, time is of the essence. Conflicts that arise at the point of service or any point of conjunction in the organization need to be resolved effectively and in a reasonable time frame. Conflict is a dynamic; it does not remain static and therefore continues to deepen and expand the longer it remains unresolved. Timeliness requires sufficient resources to address the conflict as quickly as possible so that the stages of resolution can be activated as soon as possible.

Because 90% of conflict will emerge at the point of service, it is imperative to focus on developing staff members in the mediation process and in leading conflict resolution activities. This requires leadership to focus on identifying and carefully selecting and preparing staff-based mediators in as many locations in the organization as possible. Of course, locating and positioning mediators in the organization must be strategically delineated to ensure an equitable distribution of skilled and trained mediators across the system. The program should ensure that staff-based problems are mediated by staff mediators and leadership problems are mediated by those leaders at the same level of the individuals experiencing the conflict situation. Therefore, carefully structuring the number of staff and role positions sufficient to address the various levels of conflict resolution will be an important strategic concern for the human resource office.

In addition to sufficient mediators and a well-developed process, consideration regarding availability, time allotment, organizational resource support, program evaluation, and mediation follow-up also needs to be addressed. Here again, human resources provides leadership in facilitating the structural and process framework for the program, assuring that the support elements are in place.

All employees should have access to the conflict resolution program once it becomes available in the organization. As it becomes the framework for resolving conflict, addressing disputes, and ameliorating differences, the expectation will quickly arise that the program will become available to everyone. Furthermore, managers must seek out opportunities for the conflict management process to be used as a way to resolve differences at their point of origin. Indeed, managers must use the conflict resolution program to provide leadership in the organization. There is a further leadership opportunity to advance employee involvement and to empower workers in owning and expressing accountability for issues that belong to them and should be addressed at the right place in the organization. When leadership uses the program, employees will increase their investment, contributions,
and actions as members of the work community. This level of worker investment in problem solving reaps several peripheral benefits for the organization: timely problem solving, creative identification of important issues, and engagement of workers in issues and concerns over which they have substantial influence. Leaders themselves must also be willing to embrace employee-derived solutions to long-standing organizational, operational, or relational problems. Leaders must be willing to actively support resolution by facilitating and assuring that resolution decisions and actions be clearly undertaken in response to the conflict resolution process.

**STRUCTURE RESOLUTION**

Organized and programmatic conflict resolution is a decisional that includes an organized process that structures the mediation. Effective programs such as these are serious work and make an important contribution to good human dynamics and to the resolution of issues at every level of the system. Effectiveness can be modified if a rigorous faithfulness to good process is not consistently and continuously undertaken by all involved in the mediation activity.

The stages of mediation require specific process, documentation, and procedural activities. Employee and leadership mediators at every place in the organization must be deeply inculcated and highly skilled in the application of the process. The mediation conflict resolution process has eight general stages that must be engaged in throughout for it to effectively impact the conflict and the parties seeking resolution. At a minimum, the following elements are included in the mediation process:

1. Welcoming the participants, explaining the mediation process, identifying issues of confidentiality, and laying the ground rules for the process.
2. Participant’s description of their situation, which includes outlining their issues and giving a language to their feelings and to the processes associated with their part in the conflict.
3. Identifying the issues main concerns, restating the primary issues, writing down the specific understanding related to the issues, and reordering the identified main concerns.
4. Participants seeking solutions, including restatement of ideas, notions, suggestions brainstorming, exploration, and aggregation of possibilities.
5. Evaluation and selection of participant ideas for resolution, including discussion of liability, priorities of choice, areas of resonance or agreement, and identification of the emerging confluence of solutions.
6. Enumeration of solutions and specification of impact, response, role, and individual commitment to actions related to the solutions.
7. Documentation of resolution including specific clarification of all items of resolution, performance expectations, follow-up actions, and evaluations or evidence-based performance follow-up.
8. Evaluation of mediation process including participant evaluation of the process, mediator, and evaluation of the dynamics and the process and submission of evaluation for program review.

**CONFIDENTIALITY IS CRITICAL**

The design of the program should ensure the participants remain confident that the issues and elements discussed in the processes associated with the conflict resolution program remain confidential and within the context of the specific resolution events. Breaches of conflict and generation of information by mediators or participants to others virtually eliminate the viability of the program and universally reduce trust in its application. Both mediators and participants should be fully sensitized to this issue of
confidentiality as a fundamental subset for undertaking any conflict resolution process or developing a resolution program.

**EVALUATE THE PROGRAM**

The human resource function should constantly and continuously undertake evaluating the elements, processes, and structure of the program. Evaluation of program effectiveness is a critical element in assuring the ongoing and continuous viability of the program. Adjustments and adaptations are periodically required to continue to make the program relevant. Furthermore, evaluation of mediators and their skills is critical to assuring that the level of talent in the mediation process remains consistently high. Solid mediation is evidenced by indicators of satisfaction of the participants and by continuous positive evaluation of the program. A program such as this has huge potential for human error and mediator-associated problems. Reducing the opportunity for such problems depends entirely on the developmental tools of the program, the continuing and growing skill level of the mediators, the successful resolution of conflicts, and the ongoing viability and utility of the program to all employees in the organization. Evaluation must occur in all of these places. The effectiveness of the conflict resolution program in the system requires that the human resources office continuously engage in specific and programmatic evaluation to sustain the program.

**CONCLUSION**

Although conflict resolution programs are relatively new to the health care system, they have existed in service and industry for several years now. As indicated at the outset of this article, well-designed conflict programs have been highly successful and have had a significant impact on problem solving and effective employee engagement in organizations. Health care is a particularly humanistic environment, requiring higher levels of relationship and functional interaction between and among the members of the work community. The opportunity for conflict is accelerated by increased intensity of interaction and human communication.

It would appear that conflict resolution programs could provide a viable option for addressing these human concerns embedded in the work relationship. Careful development of conflict resolution programs with regard to design, structure, implementation, and evaluation of such programs provides a foundation for ensuring that these programs can be effective and viable tools for dealing with worker issues, differences, and conflicts. Through careful attendance to the details in developing such programs, health care organizations and systems can significantly benefit from the increased involvement of all levels of employees. Ownership in resolving human conflict, whether by caregivers or by supporters to the system, can further ensure the highest possible quality of service, human interaction, and problem resolution.

**REFERENCES**
