CONFLICT RESOLUTION: IT'S A SCIENCE, NOT AN ART

When conflict occurs in the workplace many managers rely on experience or a "gut feeling" when resolving the problem. And sometimes it works.

But there is a better way. Professionals in the field of conflict resolution suggest following a step-by-step process when solving personnel problems.

Lance Woodbury, a mediator/facilitator for Kennedy and Coe, LLC, an accounting and consulting firm located in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Colorado, combined a farm background with a master's degree in conflict analysis and resolution. As a mediator, Woodbury follows an organized pattern when helping families or businesses resolve conflicts.

THE PROCESS

"First – and this is the biggest hurdle – you have to get the involved parties to admit a con-

flict exists," he says. "Generally, people try to avoid conflict, simply hope it will go away, refuse to discuss the problem or blame someone else.

"To cross that hurdle I like to explain to them that conflict is normal. In fact, a truly dysfunctional agricultural operation would be one where everybody gets along. Good managers recognize that conflicts happen, they communicate this to their people and then they put their energy into developing a solution."

Once the problem is out in the open, Woodbury says the next step is assessment – when you evaluate alternatives. At this stage he says to consider the best and worst alternatives to a negotiated settlement.

"Start by asking yourself this question," Woodbury says. "What will happen if I don't resolve the conflict? That's important because it deals with consequences. If you can live with the

CONFLICT CHECKLIST

SIGNS OF CONFLICT
- Poor communication
- Adversarial behavior
- Unhealthy competition
- Sabotage
- Low productivity, morale and trust
- Confusion, resistance to change
- Differing expectations and goals
- Reluctance to implement decisions
- Absence of recognition and praise

HOW TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT
- Agree on a process
- Establish ground rules
- Consider each party's perspective
- Focus on listening, restating
- Look at sources of conflict
- Mutually define the problem
- Look at interests behind positions
- Consider alternatives
- Define solutions

consequences of not solving the problem, don't proceed. That's the best case. But usually conflicts build and begin to detract from teamwork and togetherness. Team members become dissatisfied, trust erodes and people quit. That's worst-case and no organization can afford that."

If you decide the conflict is worth resolving, Woodbury says it's time to move to step 3 where you analyze the problem. Step 4 is where you generate options and step 5 is where you make a decision.

EXAMPLE

As an example, Woodbury describes a situation where two cowboys are paired in a feedlot and work as a team. Cowboy 1 routinely fails to identify sick animals, angering Cowboy 2 who believes the failures reflect on them both.

"The manager should meet privately with the two cowboys," Woodbury says. "Thank them for agreeing to the meeting, then get each one to commit to solving the problem. That builds momentum for the rest of the process.

"Next, lay out the ground rules. Explain that they must be respectful, they must not interrupt, and that there will be an appropriate time to ask questions. Then, ask Cowboy 2 to explain the situation while Cowboy 1 listens. When Cowboy 2

finishes, the manager summarizes his points and searches for items that can be resolved.

Next, Cowboy 1 is allowed to explain his view of the situation while Cowboy 2 listens. Again, the manager summarizes. At this point you have a list of issues and you get the cowboys to brainstorm about possible causes and solutions."

The theory, Woodbury says, is to use open communication to turn the "I" knowledge that each cowboy has into "we" knowledge that they can share. During the exchange, reasons for failing to identify sick cattle will emerge. They may include a lack of skill, poor training or even carelessness. But once identified, solutions can be implemented.

"Managers will find that 99 percent of the time problems are the result of a lack of communication," Woodbury says. "Because of that, most problems get resolved during the story-telling phase because the people know they have been heard. Still, there is a final piece of the process. Once agreement has been reached, write it down and have them sign it. Signing off on the list provides a sense of commitment. And, you have a copy for the employee's file if you need it."

COMMON PROBLEMS

While the process of conflict resolution is relatively straightforward, Woodbury has specific suggestions for dealing with common workplace problems. They include:

• Personality conflicts

"First, it's important to realize that as a manager you can see the personality conflict, but often the combatants don't. So it's important to get them to realize that they are different.

"Second, research shows that people are more likely to support an agreement that they come up with. So the real key is that the solution shouldn't come from the top. Get them talking about how they can work better together. Involve them but don't give orders because orders are temporary. The short-term solution may be to separate them. But for a long-term solution you need to get them to invest in the future together," he says.

• Personal problems

Manage people long enough and you are sure to face performance problems that have nothing to do with the workplace. Marriage problems and the like require a personal touch.

Woodbury says this is a tricky area because an employee's personal problems affect the team as well as the individual. There are two approaches and both should be used.

"First, if an employee is valued, handle the problem personally and to the best of your ability. Let the other team members know that you are aware of the problem and are working on it. That way unhappy team members won't compound the problem," Woodbury says.

"Second, provide education on stress management. There's a wealth of material out there, and it helps employees realize that they're not alone with their problems. Make people aware that problems can be solved."

• Overzealous employees

On one hand, employers love those go-getters, the aggressive, aim-for-the-top employees. On the other hand, they can create conflict and resentment in other team members that can fester.

"In this situation it's important to help the employee see the consequences of his behavior. Be honest and direct. Say, 'I know you are really gung ho and I appreciate your effort. But here's how it affects the team. By pushing so hard, you are pushing them away.' When someone realizes other people are upset, they are more likely to change their behavior. Don't place blame. Just focus on the problem and help the employee create a solution," he explains. ✦