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Make Conflict Your Ally



Conflict between co-workers can add value if managed effectively.

By Ann Pace

When the topic of workplace conflict is broached, many employees envision tense meetings, red-faced supervisors, and stressful encounters with colleagues that keep them awake at night.

However, when managed effectively, conflict can be a means to increased creativity and productivity in the workplace.

CPP Global shares this conclusion through its latest report, "Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness it to Thrive." This study asked 5,000 full-time employees in Europe and North America about their attitudes toward conflict.

Eighty-five percent of employees reported dealing with conflict to some degree. Forty-nine percent of respondents said personality clashes and warring egos were the primary causes of workplace conflict, followed by stress (34 percent) and heavy workloads (33 percent).

Most conflict occurs between employees in entry-level/frontline roles, according to 34 percent of survey participants. In addition, 41 percent of respondents cited that older employees are perceived to handle conflict most effectively.

"For frontline employees who may not always see the 'big picture' the way management does, issues such as office space, working hours, or favoritism may in fact be hotbeds for conflict," says Rich Thompson, director of research at CPP.

The survey also found that an average employee spends 2.1 hours every week dealing

with conflict in some way. The top negative outcomes of such conflict include personal insults (27 percent) and sickness or absence (25 percent).

However, conflict can also lead to positive outcomes. Seventy-six percent of respondents identified a good end result from conflict. Training is the necessary ingredient that enables workplaces to experience these benefits.

Among those who reported spending time dealing with conflict, the vast majority have seen desirable outcomes such as major innovations, better solutions, and increased motivation, according to the report.

“The most significant study result is the connection between conflict training and the reduction in negative consequences of conflict,” Thompson says. “Training does not reduce the occurrence of conflict, but it clearly has an impact on how conflict is perceived and can mitigate the negative outcomes associated with conflict.”

More than 95 percent of people who received training as part of leadership development or in formal external courses say that it benefitted them in some way, CPP reports. Training helped employees become more comfortable about and confident in dealing with conflict (27 percent), avoiding conflict altogether (20 percent), and getting more positive outcomes for both parties (19 percent).

While CPP research did not focus on the design or delivery of training for conflict management, Thompson noted that conflict training can be successfully completed in a day. He says e-learning is an ideal delivery method to teach conflict management tools to individual employees, while an in-person trainer can serve as a mediator for a work group that is experiencing conflict.

