About the Author/PATTI FRALIX

Patti Fralix, author of the book "How to Thrive in Spite of Mess, Stress and Less," inspires positive change in work, life, and family through speaking, consulting, and coaching. She is the founder and president of The Fralix Group, Inc., a leadership excellence firm based in Raleigh, North Carolina. Patti has spent the past 15 years providing practical solutions to audiences of all sizes. For more information, contact her via email at pfralix@fralixgroup.com.

Maintain Control: Keeping Conflict to a Minimum

Most people do what makes sense to themselves, regardless of the impact on others. When one person's behavior is not understood and/or accepted by the other person, conflict ensues. The conflict can be overt or covert. If this conflict is managed well, which means without negativity and the inappropriate display of anger, results and relationships can be sustained, and even improved. Unfortunately, too often the opposite occurs. It is time to stop the cycles of act/react and find better solutions to differences than often assumed possible. Before focusing on solutions, let's first discuss conflict in more detail.

Covert conflict occurs when people have differences yet do not discuss them openly. There are two types: avoiding and ignoring. Covert conflict creates internal stress and results in feelings such as discomfort and anxiety, which can include physical manifestations, such as ulcers.

Avoiding conflict is similar to "holding one's head in the sand, thinking (and hoping) that the issue will go away or be resolved on its own. These thoughts are often subconscious. Ignoring is making a conscious decision to not deal with the issue. This decision can be positive or negative, and the difference relates to one's intention. If the decision to ignore the conflict is a result of "not majoring on the minors," that can be a positive and mature response. It can also be a result of choosing to "let this one go," wanting to make sure that this is something that is a problem one should address, such as a negative pattern of behavior.

Overt conflict occurs when people openly disagree and choose to confront (address) it with the other person. This occurs as a result of different perspectives, expectations, beliefs, values, and sometimes just information. When one decides to confront an issue with another, that decision should be made with full knowledge of the possible, and even probably, types of responses, of the other person. The most common types of responses are: competitiveness, compromise and negotiation. One should anticipate and prepare for those possibilities, including the appropriate response to each.

Over conflict is preferable to covert conflict, since it is not possible to resolve covert conflict. Covert conflict is like an undiagnosed and untreated disease that usually gets worse if left untreated.

Here are just a few ways that companies can help employees prevent and resolve conflicts:

Utilize Personality Assessment Tools

Utilizing personality assessment tools can help companies make better hiring decisions. One benefit of these tools is that they increase and/or improve understanding of the different communication styles and how to communicate most effectively with different types of people. Some conflicts can be prevented with this knowledge. People are usually either a direct or indirect communicator. The direct communication has more "bottom-line" talk. The indirect communicator uses more qualifiers, which often "soften" what the individual is saying. This difference alone can result in misunderstanding and conflict. To a direct communicator, the person that says, "It seems that" (a qualifying phrase) can be heard and thought of as "wishy-washy" and not getting to the point. Understanding differences such as these and communicating effectively based on those differences improves productivity and results.

Create an Environment That is Welcoming to Diversity

One of the reasons for the increase in conflicts is the increase in diversity without an increase in understanding and acceptance of the differences. Diversity in and of itself is not positive or negative. It becomes positive when the differences create opportunities for individu-

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als, companies, the marketplace, and society as a whole. When those differences create unresolved conflicts between people, the opportunities are usually lost.

Make Sure There is Role Clarity and Common Understanding of Responsibilities and Deadlines

Too many conflicts occur because managers fail to provide employees with information related to their job responsibilities and the company in general. Who is accountable for what becomes even more important to clarify in an environment of teamwork and project work. While teamwork is becoming more prevalent and necessary, too often teamwork decision making results in a lack of role clarity. Also, with most people having more responsibilities that they can easily manage, it is imperative that priorities and deadlines be clear to all.

Commit to Conflict Management

Discuss conflict on a general level so that employees understand that change and opportunity always involves conflict. Make sure people understand that managing conflict effectively is a company expectation. Treat employees as adults, expecting that they solve their own problems. When an employee complains to a manager about another employee, the manager's first question should be, "Have you discussed your concern with (name of employee)?" That manager should be a resource in helping employees to manage their own conflicts, functioning as a coach.

Implement a Communication Model For Handling Conflicts

Many problems can be diffused by effective communication. There are three steps that anyone can use to manage conflicts effectively:

1. First focus on the desired outcome of the interaction. This will usually include that the relationship be maintained, and hopefully improved.

2. Ask More Questions/Make Fewer Statements. This will improve understanding.

3. Use the dominant communication style of the other person, Direct or Indirect, even if it is not your dominant style.

Yes, the model is simple, but it is not easy. It is much easier to just start talking without thinking of the desired outcome. It is easy to think the desired outcome should be to make one's point clearly. Counter intuitively, when we focus first on understanding the other's position, ours if often heard and accepted better.

Given increased change, ambiguity, and stress, we should expect more conflict, both covert and overt. Understanding different personality styles, communicating effectively with different people, and utilizing the three-step communication model are good strategies for managing conflicts. When conflict is understood and managed effectively, results and relationships are improved. ⬡