Conflict Resolution in the Academy

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The Nature of the Organizational Context

Unique structure, mission, and government
- Decentralized model
- Own decision-making models

Heterogeneity of people, ideas, and issues
- Inconvenient questions can be asked
- Multiple voices can be heard
- Various perspectives can be considered

Primary leadership role
- Intellectual and moral foundation for our youth

Challenging resource limitations & economic pressures
- External accountability is increasingly called forth
Perceptions that Encourage Conflict Escalation

Perception of competition of scarce resources
- Reality of mandated cuts in budgets
- Need to “fight” for our share or lose decreases collaborative efforts and transparency

Perception of threatening and/or contentious influence patterns
- Coalitions emerge, one against the other (within departments and between individuals)
- Competition accompanied by overt accusations

Perception of attacks on specific personal characteristics
Predictable Precursors for Conflict

Initiation of any significant change
- Large population bubble aging - managing generations in the workplace
- Shift from “how much faculty know” to “how best students learn” – massive influx of technology
- Increased demand for accountability at all levels
- New leadership

Individual or group transition process
- Letting go of the old (ending)
- Taking time to sort out what the group wants to do
- Then starting with the new (beginning)
Spiral of Unmanaged Conflict

- Outcomes vary
- Sense of crisis emerges
- Perceptions become distorted and conflict goes outside the community
- Resources are committed
- Communication stops
- Positions harden resulting in polarization
- Sides form as cohesiveness is fractured
- The problem emerges
Sources of Conflict

INTERESTS

Values Differences
Relationship Problems
Procedural
Psychological
Substantive
Structural Problems
Data Problems
Key Skills for Effective Conflict Management

- Listen reflectively (for both feelings and facts) and ask open-ended questions for clarification
- Demonstrate empathy
- Manage anger
- Make low level inferences
- Focus on problems to solve, not on people to blame
- Negotiate on the interests, not on the positions
- Problem-solve collaboratively
- Use positive connotation & reframing
- Develop a good support network
Frequent Causes of Stress

Role Conflict
- Balancing professional obligations with family responsibilities
- Serving as both evaluator and mentor

Role Ambiguity
- Representing administration to department
- Representing department to administration
- Colleague and Supervisor

Role Overload
- Too much work
- Doesn’t have the skills or abilities to perform

Employees and supervisors who believe they have the understanding and help from the person to whom they report handle high levels of stress more effectively than those who do not have such support.
Negative Thinking

- Triggers anxiety, helplessness, and depression
- Is automatic
- Is not something of which we are generally aware
- Usually begins with a fact, but often moves to high level inferences that are not necessarily true, but once made, are treated as reality
- Is learned, and therefore, can be unlearned.

Dealing with Self:
- Cognitive restructuring

Dealing with Others:
- Reflective listening
- Reframing
- Ground Rules

Two Errors
1. Fundamental attribution error
2. Self-serving bias
Parrots and Pinches
Department Norms

- What is our main purpose?
- How can we best accomplish our mission?
- What ground rules will help us achieve our goals?
- How can we make our performance even better?
- How do we communicate with each other?
- Should we invite someone to attend one of our meetings as a process observer?
- How will we make decisions?
- How will we resolve problems?
- What kind of climate do we want in our group and how can we build that kind of climate?
Helping People Get Along

- Identify the symptoms
- Define and reframe the problem
- Generate alternative solutions
- Pros and Cons of viable options
- Experiment by trying solution for a time
- Define criteria used to evaluate effectiveness
- Fine tune solutions for improvement
Prevention Strategies for Intragroup Conflicts

- Become fluent in approaches
- Consider mentors
- Provide minority members opportunities to make specific contributions
- Hold informal social events
- Recognize contributions
- Identify problems as issues to be resolved rather than obstacles – two solutions with one preferred one.

- Discuss desired performance
  - look with the individual at gap between expected and actual
  - set time lines for changed behaviors
- Honor confidentiality
- Hold effective meetings
  - meeting audits
  - stop action
- Pay attention to both task and maintenance behaviors
- Respond empathically
Intergroup Conflicts

High Degree of Competitiveness
- Group competition tends to be stronger than individual competition

Conformity and Compliance
- Redefines perspectives and shapes understanding of situations

Identity and Categorization
- “Us” versus “Them”

As intergroup conflict escalates, stereotypes, bias, and ethnocentrism increase.

Demonstrating how our differences, capacities for critical thinking, values of collaboration, and commitment to democratic processes (university values) can contribute to forming effective communities.
Intervention Alternatives

Office of the Provost
Office of the President
General Grievance Board
Dean or Central Administrator
Mediation Assistance
Office of the Provost
Mediation Assistance
General Grievance Board
Office of the President
Office of Diversity
Institutional Equity

Department Head or Unit Administrator
Human Systems Consultant
Ombudspersons
Employee Assistance Program

Employee Relations/Engagement
Learning & Development
Labor Relations/Special Projects

Lifeline: 911

www.k-state.edu/disputeresolution
“The greatest challenge to any thinker is stating the problem in a way that will allow a solution.”

Bertrand Russell