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WORKPLACE CONFLICT - IS IT AN EMPLOYEE BURNOUT?

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ABSTRACT

Conflict at the workplace is a very common occurrence, but if not nipped in the bud, it can escalate to great heights causing employee burnout and an overall atmosphere of dissatisfaction and demotivation. Organizational conflicts can be counter-productive, stress inducing and debilitating for its employees as well as the employers. Instances of people quitting their jobs or losing their efficacy, becomes a common occurrence in conflicting workplace scenario. Conflict usually occurs due to poor communication, ego, conflicting goals, confusion about job responsibilities and poor leadership. Heated exchange between colleagues, management, employees can turn into a standoff. Power struggles can also result into conflicting situations like one party questioning the authority of another or teams trying to overtake one another and exert more influence. By using conflict management techniques, managers should be able to identify and handle conflicts sensibly, fairly and efficient. Since conflicts in a business are a natural part of the workplace, it is important that there are people who can identify and understand conflicts and know how to resolve them. This is important in today's market more than ever. Everyone is striving to show how valuable they are to the company they work for and at times, this can lead to disputes with other members of the team. Addressing employees emotional needs and remaining calm and detached during confrontations can help resolve conflicts.

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“The people to fear are not those who disagree with you, but those who disagree with you and are too cowardly to let you know.”- Napoleon Bonaparte

Conflict can be referred to as a difference of opinion caused by opposing attitudes, behaviors, ideas, needs, wants or goals. Conflict is usually associated with negative thoughts or unpleasant situations, which if ignored can lead to destructive situations. Conflict at the workplace is common, but can be serious if not resolved at the right time. It has the potential to decrease productivity, increase

employee stress, undermine morale, hamper performance, increase absenteeism and lead to irresponsible behavior. Conflict at the workplace can seep into the personal life of the individual leading to stress, loss of self-esteem, depression and general unhappiness. There have been instances of people quitting their jobs or losing their efficacy due to workplace conflicts. It has been observed that differences, individual likes and dislikes, ideas, habits, flaws and needs are usually the causes that lead to conflicts.

Usually at the workplace, conflicts occur due to poor communication, conflicting goals, confusion about job responsibilities and poor leadership. The general conflicting situations which occur at the workplace are basically of four types: simple conflict, false conflict, ego conflict and values & beliefs conflict. In the day to day functioning of the organization, conflict takes many forms. It may be as simple as two workers not getting along well with each other or an individual harboring grievances against the Manager. Conflict may take the form of rivalry between teams or can also manifest in the form of lack of trust and co-operation between large groups of employees and management. Some signs of conflict are clearly visible at the workplace like heated exchange between colleagues or a meeting of management and employee representatives turning into a standoff. However all forms of conflict may not be always obvious. Some individuals may hide their feelings as a way of coping with a problem; while a team might react to pressure by cutting itself off from the rest of the organization. But such hidden conflicts can be disastrous for the overall wellbeing of the organization. Before conflict develops, people may simply feel unhappy about colleagues or issues that are troubling them. The overall motivation level drops. Fewer people volunteer to take on new tasks and there is very little employee input at team meetings or briefings. People start back biting and making derogatory comments about each other. Fewer social gatherings and events are organized. The overall productivity falls and there are likely to be more queries and complaints as people are not co-operating with each other. Absenteeism may increase due to a general feeling of unhappiness, depression and stress. An underlying dissatisfaction has been diagnosed in such situations through staff responses and there have been cases of people quitting the job.

Managers are more likely to interpret the behavior of their employees if they maintain the regular channels for open communication and consultation. Well before issues become potential problems, Managers should be able to gauge future reaction to proposed changes. As Robert Townsend says, "A good manager doesn't try to eliminate conflict; he tries to keep it from wasting the energies of his people." As I have already discussed, conflict among co-workers is very destructive and can be a burnout as it can ruin the morale of the people involved, divert energy from the task to be done, reduce the spirit of co-operation, increase stress levels and disrupt all lines of communication. To respond to conflict effectively, one has to understand the dynamics of any conflict. Conflict at the workplace can arise due to any number of reasons. Teams and individuals may believe, they are competing for scarce or declining resources such as money, information and supplies. Team members may deny taking responsibility for a specific task (due to poorly defined responsibilities and job boundaries). Misperceptions and misunderstandings about other team members can result from poor communication and intentionally withholding information can create a feeling of mistrust. Basic differences in values, attitudes, and personalities may lead to arguments. Power struggles may result when one party questions the authority of another or when people or teams are pursuing different goals. Conflict begins when individuals have differences or perceived differences. Conflicts end when the individuals make adjustments that resolve the conflict and lead to a new understanding. Conflicts go through phrases like "spark", "fanning the flames", "taking sides", "showdown" and "resolution and adjustment." The spark phase typically involves the triggering incident that surfaces the difference or perceived difference. It could be a simple misunderstanding or a spontaneous confrontation. Fanning the flames, obviously would be heating up the conflict. The parties involved try to score over each other using persuasion or sometimes heated arguments to prove their point. "My

strategy will benefit the company.” “Well, my strategy will double the output in two years.” “That’s nothing, my plan will improve our safety record.” and the scorekeeping continues. Conflicts can sometimes escalate into major confrontations.

The conflict may start with just two individuals but it does not take long for others to become involved. Though it is natural for other employees to take sides, the ultimate result is harmful, as the workforce can split into two opposite “camps”. This can undermine teamwork, decrease productivity and create a general atmosphere of tension and stress. The most volatile phase of conflict is the showdown. Those involved in the original conflict may decide that they “just can’t take it anymore” and confront the “opposition”. This confrontation can lead to positive results as the main issue may come out in the open and both parties can face the reality of the situation. Unfortunately, the reverse is true. Confrontation, often becomes destructive because people involved react against each other in a negative manner.

#### **Who is in conflict ?**

Conflict basically tends to fall into two broad categories: Conflict between individuals, who may be their colleagues or co-workers or their managers. Conflict between groups involving teams or large group of employees and management. Conflict between individuals, colleagues can happen due to clash of personalities or strong differences of opinion over work. It can also be due to an “overspill” from personal issues outside work. Such conflicts, between people of the same rank can often lead to accusations of bullying and harassment. Good managers in such a scenario will always keep the lines of communication open. To create a climate of open and positive dialogue, would best deal with the situation. If an employee feels free to approach the manager, problems can be nipped in the bud before they escalate into formal grievances. If conflict involves an employee and the manager, then it may not be easy to identify the cause. The management style may be too authoritarian or too weak. The manager may be indulging in favoritism while assigning tasks. An employee may talk to the manager about how he feels or he may suddenly confront the manager with a list of grievances. It can be hard for employees to express their concerns with senior colleagues. If they don’t feel free to talk to their immediate boss, they may even approach another manager or employee representative, which can create still more conflicting situations.

The way a team works can be quite complex. There are often subtle balances between personalities and work responsibilities to be maintained. Conflict within teams can often take the form of rivalry between colleagues, disagreements over a team’s goal or shared values, resentment. Dr. Tuckman, an educational psychologist had developed a model in the 1960s to describe the way groups behave as they work together. Tuckman’s model identifies four distinct phases: Forming - the team is uncertain how to proceed and behavior is often reserved. Storming - the team often argues about who should do what and how. Norming – the team agrees its core tasks and individual roles within the team. Performing – the team operates along the agreed ‘norms’. Conflict is most likely to occur in the ‘storming’ phase as people form cliques and jostle for position. But this kind of conflict is essential for the development of the team. Conflict between employees and their employers, is often characterized by the classic “us and them” mentality. Conflict may be focused on specific issues like health and safety, pay hike, redundancies, lack of proper consultation but employees harbor a general resentment or anger towards management and this leads to poor morale and low levels of motivation.

Overcoming resistance and dealing with conflicting scenarios can to some extent prevent employee burnout. Part of dealing with conflict is to make people understand and accept your point of view. In a conflicting situation it is very common to encounter resistance or hostility but maintaining your composure and addressing the other person’s emotional needs can be helpful in resolving the situation. When facing irrational resistance, one should try to remain calm and detached, so as to avoid destructive confrontations. Presenting yourself in a convincing manner can help deal

with the situation Most people are ashamed of reacting emotionally in business situations. One can be sympathetic and help the other person relax and talk about his or her anxiety so that you have a chance to offer reassurance. Making people aware of their resistance can also help resolve conflicts. When people are noncommittal and silent, they may be tuning you out. Dealing directly with this resistance, without being accusing, focusing on what the other person is expressing, both words and feeling is important to deal with the differences. Getting your point across depends as much on the other person's frame of mind as it does on your arguments. You can't assume that a strong argument will speak for itself. By becoming more audience – centered, you will learn to address the other person's emotional needs. As aptly quoted by the late Prime-Minister, Indira Gandhi, "You can't shake hands with a clenched fist." While some conflicts can never be eliminated, there are ways to prevent it. There is a difference between preventing conflict and avoiding conflict. When you are avoiding conflict, you are actually trying to withdraw from the situation. Sometimes we also fail to admit that the conflict exists. But when you are trying to prevent conflict, you are consciously taking steps to remedy a situation before it becomes a conflict.

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