RICK'S TIPS

Rick's Tips **explores the competencies necessary for successful leadership and provides activities to assist with the development and mastery of these skills.**

THE EXECUTIVE GROUP

MANAGING CONFLICT

It is human nature to avoid conflict. The more a manager cares about the people who work for him, the more difficult conflict management becomes. Do not confuse being more direct with being confrontational. More often than not we think of conflict as being negative, in the same way we view and treat anger as being negative. Anger in the workplace usually exists where strong emotions exist. It is expected that conflict and anger will exist among people who care about an issue. Learn to recognize conflict as a good thing.

To be able to manage conflict we must first recognize the signs within ourselves. When an individual has a high regard for people, those tendencies may unknowingly increase conflict and may include:

- Over accommodating, wanting everyone to get along
- May get upset as a reaction to conflict, takes it personally
- Gives in and says yes too soon
- Gets into conflict by accident; doesn't see it coming
- Will let things fester rather than dealing with them directly
- Will try to wait long enough for it to go away

SPECIFIC ACTIONS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

- **Identify your personal sources of conflict**
  Create more awareness as to where conflict comes from. Do specific people, issues, styles, or groups set you off and make you handle the conflict poorly? Write down the last 5 times when you handled conflict poorly. What is common in the situations? Are there three to five common themes? Are the same people involved? Different people but the same style? Certain kinds of issues? Once you have isolated the cause, mentally rehearse a better way of handling it when it comes up next time.

- **Kinds of conflict to watch for**
  There is data-based conflict: "my numbers are better than your numbers." There is opinion conflict: "my opinion has greater value than yours." There is power conflict: "this is mine." And there is unnecessary conflict due to how people position themselves and protect their turf. Politics, Silos and Turf Wars by Patrick Lencioni to gain greater perspective here.

- **Cooperative relations**
  The opposite of conflict is cooperation. Developing cooperative relationships involves demonstrating real and perceived equity, the other side feeling understood and respected, and taking a problem-oriented point of view. This is probably your strong suit. To do this more: increase the realities and perceptions of fairness. Don't try to win every battle and take all the spoils; focus on the common ground issues and interests of both sides – find wins on both sides, give in on little points; avoid starting with entrenched positions – show respect for them and their positions; and reduce any remaining conflicts to the smallest size possible.

- **Causing unnecessary conflict**
  Give reasons first, solutions last. When you give solutions first, people often directly challenge the solutions instead of defining the problem. Pick words that are other-person neutral. Pick words that don't challenge or sound one-sided. Pick tentative words that give others a chance to maneuver and save face. Pick words that are about the problem and not the person. Avoid direct blaming remarks; describe the problem and its impact. Read How to Talk so People Will Listen by Steve Brown.

- **Let the other side vent frustration, blow off steam**
  Don't react. Listen. Nod. Ask clarifying questions. Ask open-ended questions like, "What one change could you make so we could achieve our objectives better?" or "What could I do that would help the most?" Restate their position periodically to signal you have understood. But don't react. Keep them talking until they run out of venom. When the other side takes a rigid position, don't reject it. Ask why – what are the principles behind the position, how we know it's fair, what's the theory of the case. Play out what would happen if their position was accepted. Then explore the concern underlying the answer. Separate the people from the problem. When someone attacks you, rephrase it as an attack on the problem.

- **Minimize the conflict**
  Almost all conflicts have common points that get lost in the heat of the battle. After a conflict has been presented and understood, start by saying that it might be helpful to see if we agree on anything. Write them on the flip chart. Then write down the areas left open. Focus on common goals, priorities and problems. Keep the open conflicts as small as possible and concrete. The more abstract it gets, "We don't trust your unit:" the more unmanageable it gets. To this respond, "Tell me your specific concern – why exactly don't you trust us, can you give me an example?"

Usually after calm discussion, they don't trust your unit on this specific issue under these specific conditions. That is easier to deal with. Allow others to save face by conceding small points that are not central to the issue, don't try to hit a home run every time. If you can't agree on a solution, agree on a procedure to move forward. Collect more data. Appeal to a higher power. Get a third-party arbitrator. Something. This creates some positive motion and breaks stalemates.

- **Conflict and emotions: theirs and yours**
  Sometimes our emotional reactions, the lack of our emotional reactions, or a delayed reaction, lead others to think we have problems with conflict, do not care or are distancing ourselves from the conflict. In conflict situations, what emotional reactions do you have? Learn to recognize those as soon as they start and substitute something more neutral. Most emotional responses to conflict come from personalizing the issue. Separate people issues from the problem at hand and deal with people issues separately and later if they persist.

- **Move emotion to data**
  Always return to facts and the problem before the group; stay away from personal clashes. Attack the problem by looking at common interests and underlying concerns, not people and their positions. Try on their views for size, the emotion as well as the content. Ask yourself if you understand their feelings. Ask what they would do if they were in your shoes. See if you can restate each other's position and advocate it for a minute to get inside each other's place.

- **Clear problem-focused communication**
  Follow the rule of equity: explain your thinking and ask them to explain theirs. Be able to state their position as clearly as they do whether you agree or not; give it legitimacy. Separate facts from opinions and assumptions. Generate a variety of possibilities first rather than stake out positions. Keep your speaking to 30-60 seconds bursts. Try to get them to do the same. Don't give the other side the impression you're lecturing or criticizing them. Explain objectively why you hold a view; make the other side do the same. Ask lots of questions, make fewer statements. To identify interests behind positions, ask why they hold them or why they wouldn't want to do something.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High by Kerry Peterson

Verbal Judo, The Gentle Art of Persuasion by George J. Thompson and Jerry B. Jenkins