

The Cost of Conflict: How to Save Time, Money and Headache

Conflict happens. It shows up everywhere—in our families, our workplace and our community. It can be as simple as a difference of opinion, as confounding as a clash in values or as agonizing as suffering racial inequities. How we respond can either exacerbate an issue or foster resolution. Without question, if left unaddressed, most disputes will cost us time, money and grief.

The expense of unresolved conflict is most commonly measured by excessive sick leave, number of hours off task, personnel turnover rate, amount of client complaints and litigation fees. Dollars and hours aside, human impacts can include declining health, damaged relationships and the growth of apathy, resentment and bias—all of which have influence on group satisfaction, productivity and commitment.

Not only can conflict threaten both the financial health of an organization and human performance, but it can also sway public perception and deteriorate an otherwise robust client and supporter base.

When we look at the anatomy of organizational tension or “pain points,” it’s helpful to consider that like most physical maladies, there can be several causes, symptoms and treatments. Our clients – ranging from government agencies to private sector business to non-profits – routinely tell us the source of their conflict is usually due to one of more of the following: poor communication, bad attitudes, personality conflicts, bias, misunderstandings, unclear roles and responsibilities, ineffective leadership, inadequate policies and procedures, and failure to include and appreciate.

Once untreated conflict gains a foothold, a variety of symptoms can develop, such as, people stop communicating, complaints mount, cliques form, morale drops, tempers flare, gossip prevails and negative criticism increases.

As issues compound and without an effective intervention process in place, leadership is often tempted to ignore early warning signs and hope time will take care of the problem. Management might also isolate those involved from each other, direct the parties to work things out on their own and, one of our least recommended options, request they “not bring forward a problem until they have a solution, too.”

For decision-makers who encourage transparency and dialogue, they can also get mired in a protracted drama if their good intentions are not anchored in a deliberate and thoughtful process for how to define and sort issues. This situation gets even stickier if management is “part of the problem.”

In our work as neutral mediators and facilitators, whether called in for a two-party dispute, organizational development or team problem-solving, we typically encounter a lot of uncertainty and fear. People are afraid of change, of losing power and respect, or of being labeled, retaliated against or even losing their job. With rare exception, we experience just the opposite when we are able to craft clear objectives, focus on common interests and follow a collaborative path forward. Relationships are strengthened and the capacity to independently communicate and problem solve is enhanced.

Fundamentally, Lang & Associates helps people have difficult conversations. We see conflict as a natural opportunity to make choices that will not only save time, money and headaches, but also normalize cultural norms for how an organization can manage conflict to its advantage.

We look forward to hearing from you.