

Reconciling *Yin & Yang* **Managing conflict in the workplace**

There are many roles accorded to managers. Effectively rising to their multi-faceted function of managing a team of subordinates means they have to play director, instructor, motivator, disciplinarian and role model. One role that is often overlooked, but arguably among the most crucial to the productivity of a team, is that of a mediator in times of internal conflict. If a manager is able to understand and master the skill of mediation, it could prove to be one of the most powerful in his or her arsenal of managerial tools.

Conflict: friend or foe?

Today, organisations accept that diversity is a management strategy that, if incorporated well, can lead to exponentially greater results. The ultimate aim of putting together a dynamic team consisting of individuals with distinct personalities and traits is to achieve richness in views and ideas, from which the most surprising solutions can spring forth.

But in a confluence of differing views from different individuals, friction becomes a highly likely eventuality. Conflict is in fact a natural product of diversity. But it is a much maligned social occurrence, usually attributed with notions of discord, disregard, isolation, and in extreme cases, mutual despair. On the contrary, it is *poorly managed* conflict that specifically causes problems within a group context. As is often the case, the negative emotions triggered by conflict compounds the situation by adding tension, blurred judgement, aggression or passivity, and subsequently even more conflict to the mix.

In actuality, conflict is an essential part of organisational progress, without which stagnancy could turn out to be a hidden enemy. It is through conflict that problems are observed, or through gaps in current practices that innovative ideas are inspired.

But dealing with unmanaged conflict in everyday situations is not an easy skill to acquire. However, much can be learnt from a piece of classical philosophy that sprang up from early Eastern thinking.

Yin versus Yang

The concept of *yin and yang* has been perpetuated by many aspects of Eastern culture and philosophy. Essentially, it can be described as the contention between two opposing forces, for example, day and night, or hot and cold. *Yin* needs *yang* as much as *yang* needs *yin*.

Similar parallels can be drawn in the workplace and interpersonal relations in general. Conflict among people emerges when the individuals involved have their values or viewpoints challenged. And when unchecked negative feelings borne from friction occur, it is up to the manager to step in and help colleagues-at-war put aside their differences and work together.

Kiss and make up

Because people react differently in a stressful situation, there is no single cure-all or set of step-by-step pointers that can be effectively used for any situation. Instead of simply generating solutions, a mediator should focus on setting the stage for resolution to take place. The best case scenario is one where the parties involved are able to reach a common ground on their own accord. Here are a few ways in which mediators can turn a potentially ugly situation into fertile ground for positive interaction.

Communicate

If relating to one another is the premise on which human relations are based on, then communication is the fundamental beams that build them up. When it comes to resolving a conflict, communication is crucial in bridging divides in perceptions. Communication is not simply getting employees to wait their turn to speak. As mediators, managers should actively reframe the points offered by each side so that there is mutual understanding.

Collaborate

Bonds are strengthened through shared victory. By reframing a problem into a common challenge to work towards, conflicting parties may eventually appreciate each other for their individual strengths. But collaboration between people who have existing reservations against each other also has the same potential to exacerbate tension. Therefore it is crucial for managers to regulate and observe interactions so that negative emotions can be kept at bay and synergy is achieved.

Compromise

Just as some situations can be tackled, others are better left in the past. In instances where the grievances cannot be reversed, mediators should try to look for avenues in which conflicting parties are able to establish a win-win situation even if it is to a lesser degree.

Compete

In the same way that games and sports are founded on the understanding that fair competition brings out positive human qualities such as striving for excellence, respect and friendship, sometimes the best way to resolve a conflict is to simply fight it out. The responsibility of a mediator is to play the referee, setting the rules and boundaries of the friendly competition and ensuring that all parties accept the outcome without harbouring unsettled unhappiness.

Be the bigger person

Among all the functions of a manager, mediation is probably the toughest to master well, requiring an acute sense of justice as well as sensitivity to myriad human expectations, feelings and their corresponding behaviour. Since it is not simply a one-to-one affair, it demands respect for equality, rendering the same consideration for each employee involved.

Nonetheless, it is a role that all managers should strive towards because it could be the difference between a dynamically dangerous team and a productively dynamic team. The trick is to get both *yin* and *yang* to realise that their differences are really nothing to get worked up about.