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Human Resources' Role in Avoiding Conflict in the Workplace

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Abstract

Psychologists have proven there are many causes of conflict; the vast majority of these causes can find their roots in displaced anger or a buildup of stress that leads to an unhealthy release, such as a display of hostility. Human Resource professionals are expected to find a way to limit, control, and eliminate these situations before they become a problem. Avoiding situations of work place conflict, especially violence is one of the most important duties for a corporation; these issues can be avoided by the Human Resource Department with relative ease by hiring the right people, as to ensure the development of a cohesive team, eliminating at work stressors through good management strategies, and by requiring personality tests to assess individuals' fit within the organizations culture.

Keywords: Work place Conflict, Personality, Non-Traditional Management, Interviewing

Human Resources' Role in Avoiding Conflict in the Workplace

Introduction

According to the CPP Global Human Capital Report July 2008, eighty-five percent of workers report that they experience workplace conflict varying from infrequently to very regularly (CPP, 2008). Conflict can be an act as seemingly insignificant as one employee making a snide remark about a co-worker; conversely, conflicts can escalate into events like the shooting at the Virginia Television Station in which multiple employees were killed by one of their peers. Obviously this is a major concern for management, and subsequently Human Resource professionals, who are obligated to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their employees. This task of preventing and resolving work conflict often time is passed onto the Human Resource department, which going forth will be referred to as simply HR.

HR professionals have come pretty close to a consensus that the best way to manage workplace conflict is by hiring workers that will work effectively together. HR is also often called upon to keep managers in check and to keep them from causing conflicts amongst both their equals and their subordinates.

Recruiting: Preventative Maintenance

The best way to avoid conflicts in the workplace would be to have the organization's recruitment specialists hire people that all get along and work well together; however, this is not an easy task for even the best recruiters to accomplish. There are several facets to consider when interviewing and eventually selecting the best candidate. These include: the fit of the personalities of the candidates to the organization, the interviewer's interviewing skills and methods, and the process of selecting the best candidate vs. the most qualified candidate. If a

recruiter is able to find the appropriate balance between these three variables, and hires the best fit candidate, then the likelihood and number of conflicts will be reduced significantly.

Personality and Conflict

Many researchers agree that Personality may be one of the largest influences in both conflicts at work and job success. With that knowledge, it is an easy assumption that all application processes should include a personality test and that HR professionals should know what type of people will succeed in each of their open roles. For instance, a construction worker position may be best suited for a person with a personality type that would not be successful in other fields. Spector emphasizes that “personality traits can be important because certain classes of behaviors can be relevant for job performance and other behaviors in organizations” (Spector, 2012; p. 115).

There are various methods for assessing personality types and the jobs associated with these positions. This leads to the biggest question, as it pertains to assess personality, which model is best? A Google search for personality test will yield 27,500,000 results and the vast majority of these results will be absolutely worthless. However, in order to get access to some of the more reliable tests, such as the official Myers-Briggs, there are charges that may cost upwards of 50 dollars per test (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2015).

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

History of the Test. One that has grown increasingly popular over the past few years is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test (MBTI). The MBTI was initially developed by Katherine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2015). These two ladies were fascinated by the differences in personalities that they could naturally observe; thus, they began to study the existing research on the subject especially the work of C. G. Jung (Myers

& Briggs Foundation, 2015). Isabel Meyers then took over the bulk of the work shaping the MBTI into what it is today:

After several years of adding her own observations to those of Jung, Isabel Myers, a graduate of Swarthmore College, began creating a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to assess type. The MBTI[®] instrument was developed over the next three decades as research was collected from thousands of people. Research on the MBTI instrument has continued into the present, with dozens of articles published each year (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2015).

All of the hard work put into the MBTI and the simple layout of the instrument, has made it, arguably, the most popular personality tests in use today.

Functionality of the Test. The MBTI is a series of questions that, when answered honestly, describe several traits about a person, everything from how the person best learns to the way they interact with others. The test is able to accomplish this by assigning each individual some combination of four letters that all align with a certain personality characteristic. More specifically there are four categories these are best summarized by Culp and Smith in their 2009 report on the subject: “The MBTI identifies behavioral preferences on four scales with two opposite preferences defining the extremities, or poles, of each scale...” (p. 66). They continue discussing in more detail the four scales which are as follows: Extroversion (E) vs. Introversion (I), Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N), Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F), and Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P) (Culp & Smith, 2009). Each test taker is labeled with a letter that corresponds to one of the two options for each of the four categories, which equates to 16 possible personality categories. For example, a person may be labeled an INFJ which would mean that they are likely introverted, use their intuition to process new information and knowledge, they make quick decisions based

on emotions instead of long thought, and they prefer a more rigid structure in their lives (Culp & Smith, 2009; Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2015). These types make evident certain strengths and weaknesses that each of these groups possesses which allows people who are well versed in this assessment, to easily find jobs that work well for each group and people who work well with each group. Also, those who have assessed the MBTI have positioned themselves “generally favorable” towards its validity (Carlson, 1985; p. 356).

Application of the MBTI. Human Resource professionals that are experienced with using MBTI will know what types of personalities will mesh well with certain job postings. For example, Culp and Smith found that “96 percent of individuals with Extraversion and Feeling preferences who enroll in engineering [programs] transfer to other fields in the first two years of college” (2009; p. 65). They also found that a large portion of engineers are prescribed the NT labels, with the most common MBTI being INTJ by a significant margin (Culp & Smith, 2009). Some companies, most prominently Hallmark Cards, have even begun developing and utilizing training sessions focused on an around the MBTI with aims to reduce conflict and lower communication errors (Overbo, 2010). These trainings and “the Myers-Briggs instrument...help[ed] managers to avoid misunderstandings that often hamper decision making and ‘flex’ their communication styles to their audience” (Overbo, 2010; p. 72). In summary, there are many ways in which the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory can be used in the workplace to prevent conflicts including both recruiting and training.

Holland’s RIASEC Model

History of the Model. Another popular model for evaluating one’s potential fit in a position is Holland’s RIASEC model, henceforth just RIASEC. Holland began work on a model in which participants in the model are assessed on six major categories (Holland, 1959). The six

themes are realistic, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Holland, and subsequently many others, have adapted the model into career interest inventories (Armstrong, Day, McVay, & Rounds, 2008). This model is one that has been worked on and changed extensively. Many new models have spawned from Holland's model and Holland himself continued to edit his own work until his death.

Application of the Model. One of the evolved forms of Holland's RIASEC is the IIP RIASEC Markers Scale test. The IIP version still measures the same six central themes that are constructs of Holland's original work, but the IIP has been made into a more concise test. One in particular is a survey containing 48 questions in which the participants rate certain tasks or careers on a Likert scale ranging from one to five, where one is dislike and five is enjoy (Rounds, 2014). The application of this model is similar to that of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory with one key difference. The key difference is that the RIASEC model is not nearly as popular as the MBTI; thus, the average potential employee will likely not have taken a test that explicitly relates to RIASEC. This means that the HR professional or Recruitment Specialist will be tasked with knowing what kind of personality will fit within the mold of their individual job postings, and they will be responsible for finding an employee that satisfies their needs. As an alternative, the HR professional could build one of Holland's assessments into their application or interviewing process.

Person-Environment Fit Model (P-E Fit)

History of the Model. A third and final model for assessing one's likelihood of success in a position is the Person-Environment fit model, henceforth P-E fit. This idea behind this model is the same as the idea behind the other two: "people thrive in environments that match their individual interests, goals, values, and skills" (Dawis, 2005; Holland, 1997 as cited in

Duffy, Autin & Bott, 2015). This is a very logical assumption; people who find enjoyment and self-satisfaction in their careers are more productive and have fewer conflicts with their co-workers, especially ones that also have a high P-E fit (Duffy, Autin & Bott, 2015). Just as with Holland's RIASEC model, many people have borrowed concepts this model to create new models, such as person-organization fit, needs-supplies fit, and demands-abilities fit (Duffy, Autin & Bott, 2015).

Application of the P-E fit model. Researchers have agreed that this model can be stretched to fit more situations than just purely career field fits. One study experimented with applying P-E fit as a predictor for student enrollment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics field at the university level (Huy, Robbins, & Westrick, 2014). Another potential application that is being used fairly extensively in today's workforce is using the P-E fit model as a instrument for career counselling. By assessing one's P-E fit an experienced career counsellor or HR professional can suggest a job that would make the employee happier and reduce their conflicts (Hardin & Donaldson, 2014). Furthermore, a career counsellor could also recommend that the employee may not have to change their job necessarily, but instead they could recommend that a change in their work environment, such as the people with which they surround themselves, may have a larger impact (Hardin & Donaldson, 2014). In conclusion, this model is more difficult to learn how to utilize more effectively, but it has more practical uses and can have a larger lasting impact on the workforce.

Conclusion

In summary, personalities play a huge role in one's success on the workplace; however, very few people actually assess them. Furthermore, there are numerous tests available that would make the hiring process less of a gamble and would lead to fewer conflicts at work. Some

of these tests include the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator assessment (MBTI), Holland's RIASEC model, and the Person-Environment Fit model. All three of these tests have advantages and disadvantages, so it is impossible to say that any one of these three models is superior to the other two. When deciding which one of the personality assessments to use, the Human Resource professionals should gather together and evaluate which model best serves the needs of their organization and which model best fits the vision and mission statements of their organizational culture.

Interviewing the Right Way

Once the position has been set up to attract the right type of people, the next step is to ask the right questions in the interview to discover the finer details of each interviewee's personalities in order to ensure that they will mesh well with management and the other employees. This step is partially covered in the P-E fit model, but the interviewer should be sure to ask questions about what type of work and environment makes the interviewer the happiest. An interviewer should also review the interviewee's past work history to see if they have had any kind of previous work-conflict related issues. An interviewer should be cautious not to discount a well-qualified individual due to one or two past issues; a potential candidate should only be disqualified if there has been a long history or a pattern of issues.

Another important issue to consider is the confirmation bias. A confirmation bias is when one "seek[s] confirmatory evidence makes it likely that a hypothesis will be confirmed" (Snyder & Swann, 1978 as referenced in Sackett, 1982 p. 789). Confirmation biases can derail the entirety of the interviewing process and can lead to an employer to hiring the wrong candidate, but an experienced interviewer can avoid it:

Consistent use of confirmatory hypothesis testing strategies was not found when experienced interviewers, rather than college students, were used as subjects, nor when the study was set specifically in an employment interview setting (Sackett, 1982; p. 789). In summation, with practice and by avoiding common pitfalls of interviewing an organization can ensure that the interviewing can weed out potential problems and prevent conflicts before they start.

Hiring the Right Candidate

Best vs. Best Fit

The final task in avoiding conflicts by weeding out potentially problematic candidates is to hire the best fit not the most qualified. This, at first, may be a hard concept to grasp because if an employee walks into the interview and has lots of experience and fancy degrees they often get the job over someone who is fresh out of college and has no practical experience, but in some instances the best candidate may not have the best qualifications.

More important than degrees, even to some extent the knowledge, skills, and abilities, henceforth KSAs, is how well the candidate fits into the company's culture. According to an article published by Talent and Development, recent college graduates want "a positive environment, meaningful work and opportunities for advancement" (Company, 2015; p. 13). Andrica states that when recruiting it is essential to be "patient, thoughtful, and thorough" and "to identify and attract the best talent" (Andrica, 1995; p. 311). Odom furthers this point in his article *Hiring the Best Candidate Not the Best Resume*. Odom states "there are many qualified people seeking positions from a credentials standpoint. The real challenge is finding the candidate that 'fits' in" (Odom, 2013; p. 61).

Some people have even begun taking the ideas of people like Odom and expounding upon them by including tests into the application process. The reason for this is “People lie...One survey...found that 42.7 percent of resumes contain misrepresentations or errors” (Van Steenwyk, 2008; p. 5). These tests can be used to assess anything and can be used as a type of “Legal Self-Defense” against discrimination cases that brought up from the hiring process (Van Steenwyk, 2008; p. 5).

Case Study

Consider for a second that there is a position open at an organization that develops toys for several manufacturers and the position is responsible for creating new toy designs. After having advertised the position for the standard period of two weeks and two candidates were identified as being leading candidates for the position. The first candidate is a 54 year old male with no children and a Master’s Degree in Marketing, while the second candidate is a woman with two children and a Bachelor’s of Science in Marketing. One candidate clearly has a better base of theoretical knowledge, but the other has a better set of practical knowledge. In the end, this decision must come down to which candidate is the best fit specifically considering personality and other traits discussed above.

Conclusion

In conclusion, finding the right people will prevent conflicts and other related issues before they ever get a chance to hinder the productivity and happiness of the organization. Furthermore, the importance of hiring people that fit into the culture of the particular organization cannot be stated plainly. It is also important that proper hiring techniques are followed and that the process is clear of all discrimination and other pitfalls that far too often

lead to poisonous workplaces full of terrible employees and instances of workplace conflict one after another after another in a continuous cycle.

Management's Role for Eliminating at Work Causes of Conflicts

Not all conflicts can be avoided by simply hiring the right people. Some conflicts are caused by completely different issues. Some conflicts are caused by having employees working in an intense, competitive environment that may be fueled by old school management styles. Traditional Management fuels the types of environments and cultures that breed conflicts thinking that this competition and conflict could be utilized by an organization to improve productivity. However, a study conducted by Barki and Hartwick concluded that there is no method of turning the negatives created by conflicts into a significant boost to productivity (Barki & Hartwick, 2001). Clearly, the goal of management should be to prevent these conflicts that will hurt the organization and the workplace in which they are centered.

Hierarchal Management Styles

The first step in avoiding these kinds of conflicts is by tossing out these dilapidated, competition-based management models that breed work conflicts. The most common of these models is the standard management model, in which corporate is on top, followed by management, and the line workers are on bottom (Whitmore, 2013). Only a select few line workers ever get to progress any further in the company and none of the others get any say in the company's affairs (Whitmore, 2013). These models often lead to the line workers underwhelming in their evaluations and their overall quality of worker greatly decreases over time (Whitmore, 2013). In short, it has been found that the management model used by most companies today is inefficient and is inevitably doomed to fail in the long run, as more progressive business strategies will prevail.

Many studies have been conducted on workplaces that have this standard hierarchical management style. One such study, conducted by Zia and Syed was conducted on a school. It was found that in these highly competitive workplaces when an administrator or a principal gave praise to a teacher for doing an exceptional job at a given task, the teacher would then go and boast to other teachers which tended to lead to conflicts between these teachers (Zia & Syed, 2013). Most often these conflicts never escalated above ignoring the other teacher, but from time to time these conflicts would result in the non-praised teacher's involvement at school functions decreasing (Zia & Syed, 2015). From all of this data and research, it is obvious that these outdated management styles are not healthy for any organization and they are not helpful in any sense.

Coaching and Non-Traditional Management Styles

The largest portion of work-conflict can be attributed to a poor company culture, or due to general poor management; however, this problem could be avoided easily by switching to a coaching model. Whitmore, in his 2013 textbook titled *Coaching for Performance*, states that “coaching can build trust...[and] coaching can bring hope” (167). Hope and trust are amongst some of the things that the youngest workers demand from a workplace (*Company*, 2015). In management models like this, management tends to be more efficient when dealing with conflict resolution. Another useful trait of healthy Non-Traditional Management is that the leaders tend to have an extremely high Emotional Intelligence, or EI (Hopkins & Yonker, 2014).

These non-traditional management models include models such as Cognitive-Experiential Leadership Model (pictured in Figure 2 below), henceforth CEL, which are created to assist an organization to manage conflict better (Cerni, Curtis, & Colmar, 2014).



Figure 1. Courtesy of (Cerni Curtis & Colmar, 2014 p. 30)

Case Study

In Whitmore's text he introduced a very interesting case study. He talked about an experience he had researched dealing with The Johnsonville Sausage Company. The company was had been having numerous quality concerns and was experiencing high turnover and high absenteeism (Whitmore, 2013). An investigation was launched at this particular factory and after evaluating the data collected, it was found that the employees felt that they had no responsibility and had no real ownership of their work; therefore, they felt it was not important to produce high quality products (Whitmore, 2013). To combat this, the company created a completely new management system, in which the line workers were given some of the management responsibility, especially the quality control aspect (Whitmore, 2013). A short time after the change, this factory made a 180 degree turn and the quality took off and this particular plant became one of the more successful plants in the region and reduced the number of workplace conflicts significantly (Whitmore, 2013). In conclusion, this particular plant saved itself by switching from an outdated management model into one of the newer non-traditional models.

Conclusion

In conclusion, workplace conflict is an inevitable plague that has infected workplaces everywhere. Most of the time these conflicts do not amount to more than some hurt feelings and poor employee involvement, but on occasion these conflicts can blow up and turn into very serious situations that can lead to extreme loss of productivity and in rare cases the loss of life. Thus, it should be of the utmost importance for Human Resources Professionals to learn how to limit the number of these conflicts and when these conflicts are unavoidable to have the kind of company culture in place to handle them in a healthy way. Finally, the final role is to make sure that the organization has the kind of employees that fit in and work well together, so that the workplace can succeed and become a leader in its particular industry. The most important role for any Human Resource professional, upper management member, or any business owner in general to, as stated in the OSH act of 1970, “furnish [for] each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards” (Occupational, 1970; n.p.).

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Tables, Figures, and Charts

Cerni, T., Curtis, G. J., & Colmar, S. H. (2014). *Cognitive-experiential leadership model: How leaders' information-processing systems can influence leadership styles, influencing tactics, conflict management, and organizational outcomes*. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 8(3), 26-39. doi:10.1002/jls.21335

Figure 2. Simplified Outline of the Cognitive-Experiential Leadership Model

