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Susan E. Woods

Cornell University, sew13@cornell.edu

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Workplace Conflict and Relationships

Abstract

[Excerpt] Not all conflict that stewards handle is with management. Conflict can arise within the union, too —within leadership circles, disputes with members, clashes among different constituency groups within the union. How a steward responds can strengthen or undermine confidence in his or her leadership and affect membership solidarity.

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Workplace Conflict and Relationships

Not all conflict that stewards handle is with management.

Conflict can arise within the union, too—within leadership circles, disputes with members, clashes among different constituency groups within the union. How a steward responds can strengthen or undermine confidence in his or her leadership and affect membership solidarity.

Conflict isn't going away, nor should it. Conflict can be a source of learning, creative solution finding, needed change and, yes, relationship building. It tells you something isn't working. So fix it. If the issues are real, the conflict will persist until underlying concerns are addressed. While conflict may not be resolved in a way that gives everyone what they want, it can be handled so that members feel acknowledged and respected in the process.

Choices Influence Behavior

We all make strategy choices which influence behavior. We can choose an approach that builds respect and relationship or one that provokes distrust, resentment, and division. Choosing a strategy that supports relationship building doesn't mean giving in. Learning to view ourselves as advocates for our concerns, rather than adversaries forcing positions, opens doors to new possibilities.

Many of us grew up playing tic-tac-toe. We learned early on to view the other side as our adversary. What one side wins, the other side loses. We succeed by outsmarting the other side, forcing them into a position where they must concede. To help them meet their needs or consider seriously their concerns is considered a sign of weakness.

Unfortunately these instincts don't work well when it's important to preserve

respect and unity within the union.

Viewing the other side as an adversary gives permission to disregard what they say, to discredit or belittle them, to intimidate them so they'll yield. When tension heats up, we run the risk of getting caught up in the argument, of being sidetracked by accusations and of overlooking key information that might lead to the discovery of a solution that works for everyone.

Where relationships are important, you have to learn from the others' perspective, add your concerns to the mix and work

together to resolve conflict. When progress seems blocked, consider these techniques.

How a steward responds to conflict can strengthen or undermine the members' confidence.

1 Use power to bring the other side into the conversation.

Conflict is like a puzzle. Each side brings a piece of the solution. Conflict resolution is about discovering the pieces and finding a way to put them together. Using power to impose an outcome that only works for you will meet with resistance and cause resentment. Even if the other side yields, the relationship is likely damaged. Instead, use power to bring them into the conversation, then work together to find the solution.

2 Talk to them; not to yourself.

Conflict resolution is all about communication. Think dialogue, not debate. Ask open-ended questions. Suspend judgment when listening. Stay alert to the underlying concerns that drive their dissatisfaction. This is key information. Letting them tell *their* story lowers their tension level and creates greater willingness on their part to listen to *your* story.

3 Don't rush to solution. Often both parties begin by declaring what's wrong and assert positions outlining what should happen. Positions clash. Each party tries to persuade the other why their view is right. When this fails, the conversation collapses into non-productive challenge and a back and forth of rejected proposals. Emotions flare as instincts to discredit and outmaneuver set in. Progress toward resolution gets lost in the shuffle. When this happens, stop. Take a step back. It's likely too early in the process to focus on the outcome.

4 Surface the underlying concerns. Instead, use the conversation to clarify underlying concerns that drive the other side's discontent. Concerns are the "Yes" factors that determine if an outcome is acceptable. You should be aware of your own concerns as well. Once both sides understand the full range of concerns that successful conflict resolution should address, the stage is set for solution-finding.

5 Restate the issue as a problem-solving question framed around concerns. The breakthrough often comes by posing the question: *So what are we really talking about here?* The response restates the issue as a problem-solving question that reflects both sides' main concerns. Framing the issue this way guides the parties into a problem-solving mode, generating options until a solution is discovered. Even if one side is unable to have all their concerns met, it's likely they will walk away with a realistic understanding of why not and the knowledge that they were taken seriously and given a fair hearing.

— Susan Woods. The writer is a workplace facilitator and trainer and has taught for Cornell Labor Studies for many years and now works with Henderson Woods, LLC.