

Interpersonal conflict:

Management tips

Where there are people there are problems. That is because we are all different in our personalities, values, goals, interests and needs – among other things. Interpersonal conflict within the workplace, actual or potential, is almost inevitable. Auckland barrister and mediation specialist **Nigel Dunlop** offers ways to avoid or deal with these work-day tensions.

“Think the best of others and be slow to draw adverse conclusions.”

We have a tendency to make false assumptions about others, and to incorrectly attribute negative motives and beliefs to them, especially when we feel hurt, offended or threatened.

We can therefore easily draw incorrect conclusions about others, for example: he does not care about me or the practice; she doesn't like me; he is lazy; she will never change; he is untrustworthy; she will never leave; he thinks I am to blame; she did that deliberately; he is incompetent; they are talking behind my back.

Psychologists call this *attribution error*. Other psychological phenomena at play include:

- *selective perception* by which we filter out information and beliefs that conflict with our own
- *reactive devaluation* by which we automatically dismiss what is said by a person we are in conflict with
- *judgmental overconfidence*, which leads us into believing we are better at evaluating situations than we really are.

When dealing with others, your perceptions do not always equate with the objective truth. Take care before reaching firm adverse conclusions about others because these affect the way you relate to them and the important decisions you make concerning them. They need therefore to be as accurate as possible.

Use words carefully

Be judicious in what you say and write to others because your perceptions and beliefs about them may not be correct. Use neutral rather than accusative expressions.

Be especially careful when ascribing motives and reasons to others, making criticisms and passing blame. Despite all appearances, you may be wrong and could cause grave offence and harm relationships as a result. It is much safer to say “I am concerned about your leaving early yesterday” than “your sneaking out early yesterday to avoid the clean-up is contemptuous”.

Express your own feelings and concerns rather than focus on the other person. So instead of saying “the kitchen is a mess because you leave your dirty dishes” say “the kitchen's a mess – what should we do about that?”

Don't let things fester

Nip incipient conflict in the bud.

Avoidance only leads to rumination, resentment and the reinforcement of unacceptable or unhelpful behaviours. Dealing with conflict when emotions have become inflamed is much harder than dealing with it when it first arises. Interpersonal conflict has the potential to severely damage a professional practice and adversely affect the quality of life of those who are part of it.

Appeal to the common interests of those involved in or affected by the conflict. This involves identifying or acknowledging the conflict and urging a resolution for the benefit of all concerned. Do this in a spirit of goodwill with an open mind and with careful use of language.

Don't accept the unacceptable

The maintenance of personal and professional standards and integrity are of utmost importance. In the long run, they are all that really count. Where conflict arises because of a threat to

such standards and integrity, then the underlying unacceptable behaviour must be confronted and satisfactorily dealt with. The ultimate solution, sometimes necessary, is withdrawal from or dissolution of the practice.

Obtain professional advice and assistance

In situations of conflict, we can be our own worst enemies. We can lose objectivity and perspective. We can lose the ability to think clearly. Solutions – often simple, effective and obvious to others – may elude us.

Talk things over with friends and colleagues in the first instance. Beyond that, however, it may be prudent or necessary to consult the NZVA, a lawyer or a dispute resolution expert such as a mediator.

Mediation

Mediators can help at all stages of the conflict spectrum. At the lower end, when conflict has just emerged, they can facilitate the discussion between those involved, aimed at restoring harmony in the workplace. At the higher end, they can help parties who are in a full-blown legal dispute negotiate a resolution that may see them parting company. Employment disputes can be mediated by Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment mediators, but those between practice partners need to be handled by private mediators. Mediators ensure that discussions and negotiations take place on a private, confidential and “without prejudice” basis, to ensure helpful frankness. ■