An Intervention Model for Addressing Conflict in the Workplace

Based on our experience with many clients, Development Associates has developed a model for helping workplace cultures that are strained by chronic low morale, poor communications, and/or interpersonal negativity. These conditions are very common, but they are often overlooked or avoided. When conflicted situations become deeply entrenched, consultation and intervention from outside the organization is often the best way to effectively cut through habitual patterns of negativity and obstructed communications.

No two cases are the same, and every intervention must respond directly to the situation at hand. However, conditions in conflicted workplaces are also substantially similar in many ways, so we have developed this model for a basic program, with variations and options as appropriate.

The approach is based on the principles of action research, a form of facilitated team interaction which combines mutual learning with results-oriented action. Action research has been a cornerstone of innovative organizational development, from the ground breaking work of social scientist Kurt Lewin to the dynamics of "learning organizations" defined by management theorists Charles Handy, Peter Senge and many others.

Our intervention model has been applied to groups ranging in size from 10 to 35 employees, and it has been effective in government, institutional and private contexts. The intervention may be applied in phases, depending upon client needs and budget, with further phases added as required. It is important to bear in mind that the process of surfacing problematic issues, developing innovative solutions and healing interpersonal wounds takes time. Usually conflicted workplace cultures have been percolating for years, and they cannot be turned around overnight. Quick-fix solutions for this type of situation are neither appropriate nor effective, and perfunctory attempts can sometimes backfire and engender further cynicism.

A TYPICAL INTERVENTION

A complete intervention cycle generally has four stages: (1) assessment of the conditions; (2) report and recommendations; (3) action implementation; and (4) follow-up and Evaluation.

1. ASSESSMENT OF THE CONDITIONS

Individual Interviews

It is imperative that we first gain a comprehensive, objective understanding of the conditions present in the group's culture. This always involves confidential one-on-one interviews, beginning with client managers. For a smaller group, we will usually interview everyone involved, while for a larger group it may be sufficient to interview selected individuals. They should represent a cross section including managers, representatives of different functional groups (or social "factions") and individuals with key roles or particular issues.

Surveys

For larger groups, the interviews may be augmented with written surveys for all employees affected. Surveys have the advantage of giving voice to more individuals when interviews may not be practical, and also providing a different method for gathering data. In anonymous surveys in particular, people sometimes feel more free to express their feelings candidly.

On Site Observation

During the assessment phase it is beneficial for us to spend some time on site with the client organization, in order to observe physical conditions and interpersonal interactions. This may involve conducting interviews on site, observing meetings, and informal observation of day to day operations.

2. REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Written Report to Management

Data from interviews, surveys and observation is analyzed and written up in categorical form for presentation to management, respecting whatever level of confidentiality has been established.

This report will include our assessment of the conditions and a recommended course of action, with various options.

Debriefing for Managers
We always meet with client managers personally to debrief on the report and recommendations, answer questions, and discuss a further course of action.

Written Feedback to Employees
We have found it to be very important for us to communicate directly with all employees after initiating an intervention process. This serves to build trust, encourage buy-in, and lay the groundwork for future changes. Any written feedback of this type will be submitted to client managers for review and approval.

3. ACTION IMPLEMENTATION

Determining the Course of Action
When we review our recommendations with managers, we work together on the joint development of a specific plan, including methods, timetable and cost. In general, two of the most effective methods we have found are facilitation of a volunteer task team, and a one-day or two-day retreat/workshop for the entire group. Each of these methods may be effective in themselves, or they may be combined.

Volunteer Task Team
A team is formed from within the organization for the purpose of addressing the problems and seeking opportunities for positive change. The team usually includes four to six individuals. There are several important factors to be considered:

- Team members must *want* to participate and have some degree of commitment, whether they are outright volunteers or are requested by management. The interpersonal chemistry is important.

- Members are generally not managers, although in some cases this could be appropriate. It is necessary for the team to be fairly autonomous, but also to be genuinely (and visibly) supported by management.

- An effective team will be diverse but balanced. Members should represent different functional areas, perspectives and social styles, but be sufficiently compatible to find common ground.

- The team needs to have specific tasks to focus on, such as developing guidelines for communications procedures, writing a code of conduct, or making specific recommendations to management.

- The team's structure and process should should be clearly defined in terms of purpose, objectives, procedures, membership and timelines.

- The team will be most effective with some form of leadership, usually a team member with some ability to facilitate. Usually we provide this facilitation at the beginning, until the group is up and running and a member is capable of taking over.

Once the team is established, we facilitate meetings with the group according to the agreed-upon framework. For example, the total number of meetings may be from three to six, occurring at intervals of one or two weeks, and usually taking from 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours. Our role as facilitators is to help the group establish a team identity and vision, directly experience honest and respectful communications practices, surface issues, brainstorm solutions, and develop a consensus approach to decision-making. The culmination of this process is the empowerment of the team to carry on without outside facilitation.

Introducing positive change into the greater culture is an incremental, ongoing process--the actual completion of this phase is open ended and could take a number of forms. The team could do any of the following:

- Make a formal presentation of its work to the entire staff.

- Make recommendations to management for new procedures or structural changes.

- Produce a final product, such as communication guidelines or a plan for socializing.

- Continue working as an ongoing group. Once established, it is good to have rotating membership so that the team becomes increasingly inclusive. Another very effective method is to occasionally invite managers into the team situation to interact at eye level.

A task team such as this can be a powerful model for collaborative problem-solving, and as a prototype its primary functions are twofold:

- Provide a nucleus or pilot for positive change within the organization. The team experience can evolve in a healthy, non-adversarial way, and eventually diffuse and influence the organization postively;

- Provide a field for learning and evaluating methods and tools for communication, facilitation and problem-solving, focused on working towards shared objectives.

Retreat/Workshop
This is in effect a concentrated version of the team process described above, and could take place in a one-day or (usually) a two-day format, preferably off-site. While such a retreat could be conducted for a small group, it also has the advantage of being able to engage a larger group of 20 to 30 people or more all at once.

Many intervention methods can be effective in this context, and the exact format depends very much on the client's needs and circumstances. Beyond that, we have found that one of our greatest challenges is being aware of the need to change course on the spot, to most effectively engage the group's energy during the course of a session. Generally speaking, for a typical two-day retreat, the first day would be oriented toward opening up channels of respectful and honest communication. This includes instilling awareness of behaviours and developing appreciation for each other's experiences and perspectives. The second day would build on this foundation of trust and honesty, moving more into the process of surfacing issues, innovative problem-solving, and planning how to take concrete steps to move forward.

4. FOLLOW-UP AND EVALUATION

Sustaining Momentum

It has been our experience that interventions such as the facilitated task group or retreat/workshop can rouse considerable positive energy and expectation. It is imperative that initiatives arising from these processes are actually implemented with some diligence, and that perceivable momentum is maintained. Otherwise, the situation can slip back into the old mode, causing disillusionment and loss of heart. The period following an intervention is therefore a critical time to follow through and avoid complacency. It is key to remember at this time that positive change is gradual and requires perseverance. Since changes are usually incremental, often "two steps forward and one step back," it is important for managers and change agents to appreciate small steps and celebrate minor victories.

Measuring Progress

It is beneficial for both managers and employees to be able to recognize and confirm positive changes, for reasons of personal motivation and satisfaction as well as cost-benefit analysis. There are a variety of methods to gauge areas where progress has occurred--and those needing further attention--using quantitative instruments as well as our own qualitative analysis.