



2010 CWCF Tele-learning Session #2
Conflict Resolution
Wednesday April 20, 2010

Presenter: Russ Christianson, Rhythm Communications

Slide #4

Positives. There are positive aspects to conflict. How you manage conflict is important.

Conflict:

1. Is a creative process.
2. Leads to change. Recognize how conflict is affecting you on an emotional level. Conflict makes you feel anxious, uncomfortable.
3. Conflict is democratic. Important, especially in a worker co-operative, that everyone at the table can express their point of view.
4. Conflict can be managed.

Slide #5

Prevention

Ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

1. Shared vision, mission, purpose and values. These are the 4 pillars of any organization. Need a clear vision that is shared amongst the members. Write or draw the vision. Need to create a mission, values, and goals of the co-op. Need to answer why we are we involved in the worker co-op.
2. Good co-operative governance practices. Many put this aside. Needs to be a real focus though. It is important to make a commitment to good governance practices.
3. Clear role definition and expectations. Workers may also be on the board of directors. There can be quite a bit of confusion. Everyone needs to know their role definition - workers and directors. What are people accountable for? People want to know what is expected of them. Russ uses an accountability chart for this (see attached). Need to know when you have autonomy and when decisions are made as a group.
4. Employment contract and compensation. Need a clear legal agreement between the co-op and the individual worker (see template attached). Compensation can be contentious. As co-op grows it can be more complex. People need to feel compensation is fair. It should also be open. No reason why it should not be. Need to know what the value of the particular job is.
5. Accountability chart. See attachment for an example.
6. Performance appraisal. Annual appraisal is a waste of time. Appraisal should be ongoing. Set measurable goals for yourself. Self evaluate on a day-to-day basis. Shouldn't wait for a year to deal with this. People in a worker co-op are self motivated and participate in decision making. Find out what support you need to reach your goals. Or if you are meeting goals, set them to a higher standard.

Slide #6

Management

1. Work life balance. Ensure people take holidays. Perhaps even close down during holidays.
2. Stress management. Breathe deeply when stressed. Count to 10. Organizational culture needs to encourage stress management. In conflict situations it is imperative to stay calm.
3. Communication. Listen. Try to stop your mind, just listen. State back in your own words what was said. Be open minded and open hearted. Have humility. Changing your point of view can be a good thing. Co-op values of respect, honesty, and openness speak to this. Do not use email to communicate around sensitive topics. Be rest assured that email can escalate the conflict. Deal with conflict on a face to face basis.
4. Protocol. Create and follow written policies and procedures.

Slide #7

Resolution. The following are the recommended steps to take to resolve conflicts.

1. Resolve directly.
2. Internal third party mediation. Go to an internal person in your co-op that both parties respect. Agree to what the process, timeline, and what the milestones are. (Participant comment - Intervention needs to happen if one or both parties do not see or will not acknowledge the conflict. Often there is a deflection. Presenter comment - It could be systemic - perhaps the goals, and/or procedures are not clear).
3. External third party intervention. Would recommend avoiding lawyers. The legal system is often conflict oriented and could make things even worse. Would recommend using neutral mediators, whose objective is to resolve the situation. Meetings should occur outside of the work place. Need someone with understanding of interpersonal issues. 'Getting to Yes' book highly recommended, about win-win negotiation. 'Getting to Yes' was written by Roger Fisher and William L. Ury (first published in 1981).
4. Voluntary or legal termination. Sometimes you need to fire people in an unresolvable conflict. (Participant comment - All provinces have an arbitration act as an alternative to the court system. Arbitration is recommended before going the legal route).

Question and Answers

Q: Quite a few of our staff are not members. This creates a different power structure. How do we equalize the member and staff person situation? A: Having an in and out group is challenging. Educate workers about worker co-operatives, about what the purpose of the co-op is. Clearly define roles. The question is how to do this to create an equitable and respectful workplace.

Q: How do you deal with workers' differing abilities and productivity? A: I am strongly opposed to the merit based system. It encourages competition and discourages communication. If you have diversity in the workplace you need to see and find out what everyone's gift is that they to bring to the table. Create synergy through co-operation. There does though have to be minimum performance standards. Adapt the workplace for the members. Recommend equal profit sharing. Expectations in the workplace also need to be clear.

Q: How do you approach someone who is creating conflict in the workplace? A: Use courage and tact to

deal with the conflict. Deal with it directly. If you feel uncomfortable, identify someone internally to deal with workplace conflicts.

Q: Do you recommend a cooling off period? A: If it escalates to a certain point, ex. physically violence, a cooling off period would be necessary. May also need time to reflect, to determine what you are feeling, and how it can be dealt with.

Presenter comment: If members in the co-op can't come to an agreement, then decide by majority rule. It is important that workers are trained in consensus decision making. These skills need to be learned. Both members and staff (future members) need to learn. Create written procedures on how consensus decisions are made. May have to table decisions till another time. If you need to make a quick decision, you may have to resort to a majority vote.

Presenter comment: Need to ask, are these the right people for this organization? Do we need outside mediation? Did we do the process properly? Important to base decisions on what is best for co-op as a whole, not on what is best for yourself or a department.

Participant comment: Belief that where there are vast differences in opinion, majority rule is the best method. Consensus may not be able to resolve all differences. Need an agreement to honour decisions of the group, even if you disagree.

Participant comment: Consensus is the process to get to a place where everyone can live with the decision. Should be able to get to this place if trained properly. Should not rush decisions.

Participant comment: Have different people with different roles in the consensus process (faciliator, time keeper, etc.)