Resolving Conflicts at Work

Interpersonal skills may hold the key to job success.

by Denise Davis-Pack and Morton Deutsch

Imagine the following scenario. Ralph is a worker at an industrial plant. He shares a room with several others, including his supervisor. During the winter, the supervisor keeps a window wide-open, making the room cold and drafty. Whenever she leaves the room, one or another of Ralph’s coworkers shuts the window. But she opens it again when she returns. The workers grumble amongst themselves to no effect.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because problems such as this occur time and again on the job. In each case the circumstances vary, but the outcome remains the same—the conflict is not resolved.

Our example points up a failing in most of today’s high school vocational training programs. They fail to teach students how to work together effectively or manage conflicts constructively. Yet many business leaders emphasize that these social skills are as crucial to success at work as is technical expertise.

As researchers at the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR) at Teachers College, Columbia University, we wanted to study the effects of training in conflict resolution and cooperative learning on three areas: student work performance, educational achievement, and psychological adjustment. In this brief report, only work performance is discussed.

The National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) at Berkeley agreed to fund our project. (The project is based upon extensive prior theoretical work and research by Deutsch and by Johnson and Johnson.)

We predicted that this sort of training would improve student work performance in a number of ways. First, students would have better relations with other workers as well as with their supervisors. Second, they would have more patience and understanding for the people they were serving. And finally, they would less likely be fired for lateness or for failing to notify a supervisor if they planned to be absent from work.

ICCCR selected three alternative high schools to participate in the project. In this brief report, we focus on one of those sites, where students were trained only in constructive conflict resolution. (At a second site they were trained only in cooperative learning; at the third site they were trained in both.)

In conflict resolution classes, students learned basic negotiation behaviors by using the A-E-I-O-U Chart, a mnemonic device developed by Ellen Raider, ICCCR project training director (see Table 1). By using I-O-U behaviors, students were able to describe their needs to others, get the “other side” to acknowledge their needs, and work toward a solution meeting the needs of both sides.

While teaching conflict resolution methods to students and staff at the first school site, we found that students in the careers class began to grasp and utilize the ideas and skills involved in constructive conflict resolution. As a result, all students successfully maintained their internship positions. One-third of the students also obtained second jobs as their skill level rose.

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Table 1
A-E-I-O-U Chart

A stands for ATTACK behaviors
(threatening, criticizing, or challenging).
E stands for EVADE
(ignoring, withdrawing, or postponing).
A and E behaviors take people further away from
resolving a conflict and often help to escalate it.
I stands for INFORM
(present feelings, reasons, positions).
O stands for OPEN
(asking questions relating to needs, active listening and
summarizing, being nonjudgmental).
U stands for UNITE (establishing common ground, build-
ing rapport, proposing solutions).
I-O-U behaviors bring people closer to reaching an
agreement.

The students were able to re-enact problems they
experienced on their jobs. Students would bring prob-
lems back to the classroom and role-play the conflict until
they found a way to resolve it satisfactorily. The evidence
suggests that student work performance improved with
training.

Ralph’s case proves the point. Ralph was not a ficti-
tious character; neither was the drafty room situation a
fabrication. Rather, Ralph was a student at the alternative
high school, and had undergone conflict resolution
training while simultaneously participating in a work
internship program. Having to work in a cold room had
become an unpleasant reality at his workplace.

Ordinarily he might have reacted as had his colleagues,
simply complaining, but doing nothing to resolve the
problem. Instead, armed with new information and skills
on conflict resolution, he decided to apply what he had
learned.

Ralph approached the supervisor directly and politely.
He used an INFORM message to indicate he felt unable to work
as effectively as he wanted because of the cold. Specifi-
cally, he explained his fingers were too cold to type because
of the drafts coming from the window. Next, Ralph re-
mained open to his supervisor’s need not to be in a room
that was overheated and too dry. Together they were able
to UNITE—to find common ground in solving the problem.
Their solution looked like this: 1) they got the control valve
on the steam radiator fixed so the room would not overheat;
2) they obtained a room humidifier to keep the air moist; and
3) they agreed to keep the window closed.

Although Ralph’s experience in this instance was suc-
cessful, it would be a mistake to assume that training
future workers in constructive conflict resolution is a
panacea for preventing destructive conflicts at work.
Supervisors, too, need well-developed interpersonal skills.
Unfortunately many do not possess them. This explains
why they may be unresponsive to the best efforts of an
employee to resolve a conflict.

It is evident that training in constructive conflict resolution—for supervisors
as well as employees—would make for
a more cooperative and productive
workplace. Increasingly industry is
recognizing the importance of such
training for supervisors and managers. Thus, in recent
years we have seen develop a proliferation of workshops
and training programs in this area.

To date, however, few programs exist in either
vocational education or industry that are geared toward
preparing nonsupervisory employees to manage
constructively the many conflicts they will inevitably
experience in the workplace. Such programs seem a
prudent investment on the part of educators and
employers, for the skills they provide can be used by
workers throughout a lifetime.

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