Managing Conflict in teams

Effective teamwork is an important aspect of work. This is something that we would all like to experience, however on occasions, working as part of a team can bring with it elements of conflict. Staff Support Service questionnaire responses indicate that it is relationships with others and feeling unsupported at work that are the biggest causes of distress and the main reasons for seeking help.

Is all conflict bad?
Constructive conflict is not necessarily negative; it can encourage creativity and stimulate change. Good conflict is managed in such a way that it creates new and better ideas through the process of resolving differences of opinion.

Unhelpful conflict
There are a number of factors which can contribute to conflict within teams, such as lack of role clarity, absence of a shared vision, lack of resources or individual styles of working. We all know that conflict can be destructive and lead to poor team performance, particularly when the conflict becomes personalised. This is often experienced as threatening and unpleasant, as the focus strays away from the task to blaming and criticism.

How might conflict show itself?
People often think of conflict as outspoken disagreement. However, in practice it is more likely to show itself in subtle and insidious ways such as "simmering resentment", dismissive comments and gestures e.g. eye rolling, tutting, general undermining and disengaging.

People may also split the team by playing one off against the other and back stabbing. Conflicts are rarely spoken about openly, people are often more comfortable with avoiding them. When this happens the conflict becomes “the elephant under the carpet”, which makes it much harder to manage.

Managing conflict
The main aim of managing conflict is to minimise the negative aspects of conflict and maximise the positive effects. There are five ways that people tend to deal with conflict; however, not all of them are effective. The more unhelpful strategies include avoiding the conflict, giving in to the conflict and accommodating the other person or competing to win, against all odds. Alternatively, compromising may sound like a good strategy, however neither party will get their needs fully met. The best resolution is collaborative or "win-win" solution.

Managing conflict constructively - “win-win”
This approach emphasises the need for both parties to look for and achieve a solution through negotiation and working together on a set of common goals. There are four steps in this process.

1. Separate the person from the problem - team problems are often attributed to "personality clashes", it is important to focus and be tough on the problem that is causing the conflict but not the person.
2. Focus on the underlying interests and needs of the parties rather than focusing on expressed positions i.e. focus on reasons behind demands, not the demands themselves.

For example: Susan asks to catch up on admin at home. Her line manager’s initial response is “no” because of pressures of work in the team. If Susan’s request receives a “flat” no, with no discussion, this means the focus is on the position and it increases the likelihood of conflict/simmering resentment. It is important to take time to consider reasons behind the request; for example Susan may need some uninterrupted time to complete her work or is struggling to contain her admin work within her hours. Looking at the reasons behind the problem may require more work at the time but has the potential to avoid conflict in the future.

3. Invent options for mutual gain - look for creative solutions that meet both parties’ interests - try to aim for “what makes sense” rather than “what I want”

4. Identify objective criteria to ensure the negotiation reaches a fair conclusion i.e. if the conflict is about workload, try to find a way of evaluating the solution to show it is fair e.g. by doing a team audit of the workload.

“I” Vs “you” statements
A helpful formula to bear in mind when negotiating is to use “I” rather than “you” statements, to avoid personalising and blaming. This is an assertive use of language, which involves telling the other person about one’s own feelings and asking for changes in behaviour that might prevent the conflict from happening again.

For example:
• “I felt annoyed because I relied on you to let me know about the meeting and it would be helpful if you could remember to tell me next time.”

Is less likely to lead to conflict than:
• “You always do this, don’t you realise you should’ve let me know?”

It is tough, but worth it.
The collaborative approach is not a quick fix solution and is quite demanding in terms of interpersonal skills and problem solving skills. It requires a great deal of self-discipline and an ability to see things from the others’ perspective - something, which can easily disappear when we are in the throes of conflict!

Whilst you may not need to constantly monitor and adjust your behaviour with others these ideas are well worth being aware of and using whenever you find yourself in a difficult situation with your colleagues.

Both the Staff Support and GHT Leadership & Development services have a valuable role in helping teams resolve conflict issues.

If you would like to make use of the Staff Support Service in help with managing conflict, please contact the Staff Support Team at the Health Psychology Department on tel 08454 228523 or email StaffSupport@glos.nhs.uk.