Workplaces experience all the highs and lows of any system of relationships. Team conflict is not unusual. When problems emerge, a first response from staff is often to lodge a grievance. As managers, we feel we need to know who has done what to whom and what we need to do to get things back on track.

Engaging staff in conflict with each other is far better than ignoring the conflict. Here’s an approach to facilitate positive engagement.

Grievances escalate to conflict

Most organisations have much the same standard policies and procedures on disciplinary and grievance procedures. And because grievance systems are designed to deal with disputes, not conflicts, they can help escalate the differences people have with each other, rather than resolve them. In all these documents, we’re all encouraged to deal with the grievance informally.

In theory, approaching those who make us feel uncomfortable is a good idea. And one not generally adhered to in practice. It is without doubt the best thing we can do. It’s just that it’s difficult and risky, so we typically choose to talk to others rather than confront the person whose behaviour we are choosing to be concerned by.

As things get left, so they tend to build. As we avoid engaging each other, so we start to resent each other and drift apart. As we drift apart we start to notice and eventually look for and find, annoying, unhelpful and even threatening behaviours in the other. Eventually what may have been able to be dealt with as a low level disagreement or dispute, escalates into a general state of negative feelings between people. We are now dealing with a conflict.

Dealing with conflicts

Conflicts — a general state of negative feelings between people — cannot be dealt with by using the typical grievance system. Try investigating the way people feel.
**Group approach — restorative justice conferencing**

At ProActive ReSolutions we’ve been using restorative justice (RJ) conferencing to respond to conflict in the workplace for many years.

Unlike our work in the criminal justice system, we don’t start with an offender who has admitted guilt, or an obvious victim who can confidently lay claim to more hurt and harm than others. What we do start with, is a group of people in conflict with others in their group, all who feel strongly about what has been happening.

**The restorative process**

The restorative process begins with confidential one-on-one interviews, listening to people tell their story about what has been happening. We take notes (that we trawl through back at our office), looking for incidents, issues and patterns of behaviour. Having identified what the issues are and which of the incidents best illustrate those issues, our final task prior to the conference is to persuade individuals that they have contributed to the conflict and need to bear some personal responsibility. The preparation in a restorative justice conference in the workplace is crucial.

Once in the conference, the flow of the process is similar to that of the RJ conference in the criminal justice system.

- Our facilitator has determined what will be talked about
- Individuals have agreed in advance to talk about particular incidents
- A conversation unfolds where the group slowly and tentatively begin to engage with each other on issues that are difficult to talk about and guaranteed to upset both themselves and others.

It’s a process where we ultimately learn that we’re almost always better off engaging with each other than ignoring each other.

**Fundamental principles**

The RJ conference in the workplace requires the same fundamental principles be adhered to as any RJ process. We expect participants leave the process with a sense that the process as explained (fair rules) was the process as delivered (fair play) and that all participants considered the outcome agreement to be fair and achievable (fair outcomes).

As in the justice system, the way we achieve this is to ensure the process was facilitated so that all those affected attended and had their say (participation), everyone’s opinions were considered (political equality), all ideas were talked through (deliberation) and no-one was able to bully or intimidate anyone else in the conference (non-tyranny).

**History**

ProActive ReSolutions has been facilitating RJ conferences in both the criminal justice system and the workplace place for 15 years. The types of ‘offences’ dealt with in the workplace range from low-level disrespectful behaviours such as isolating others, spreading malicious rumours and gossip,
insubordination and so on right through breaches of human rights and criminal law such as harassment, discrimination, intolerance, intimidation and assault.

Workplaces are complex and dynamic communities. Workplace conflict is inevitably about systems of relationships gone awry. Restorative justice conferencing is the approach that best accommodates the complexity and emotional risks faced by teams in conflict needing to restore their relationships and plan how best to transform the conflict into ongoing cooperation.

More information

Case studies on RJ conferencing and other aspects of conflict resolution are available:

- Case studies
- Cornerstone Global Associates

Source: Working with clients in Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States, ProActive ReSolutions builds more respectful behaviour between people. Contact ProActive via email or visit the website.