



## Using Effective Leadership Strategies in the Workplace

### Don't Get Burned By the Defective-Pressure Cooker Syndrome!

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In many organizations, dealing with conflict can be a messy business. Many of us tend to avoid conflict, letting it build up until the pressure becomes too great and then... BANG! The conflict blows up, there's a big mess all over the place, and the emergency clean-up crew is called in (as supervisors and managers, we're often on the crew). After considerable effort, order is restored and life continues. Unfortunately, many times the actual cause of the conflict never gets addressed so, after a short (or not-so-short) while, the pressure builds again, there's another explosion, and the clean-up begins anew. This cycle of building-up, blowing-up, and cleaning-up is often referred to as the Defective Pressure-Cooker Syndrome, and it can exact a debilitating toll on companies caught in its grip.

The Defective Pressure-Cooker Syndrome is a painful reminder that we often don't think about reconciling problems or issues until we're lost in the conflict. Just thinking about conflict tends to arouse negative emotions, and is frightening for many people. Conflict, however, is inevitable. Humankind always has and always will struggle with conflict. In the business world, one can scarcely imagine a day without conflict and the stress it causes. This ever-present fear of conflict demands attention in a way that diffuses our fears while moving us forward into more positive relationships with others.

Conflict can be caused by many things, but generally falls into three categories:

**Content-Only Conflict.** The issue itself is the focus of the conflict, and personalities are not heavily involved. An example here would be a minor "fender-bender" in a mall parking lot with a total stranger or, in the workplace, issues involving resource allocation.

**Relationship-Only Conflict.** Here, individual personality differences drive the conflict. How many of you have an annoying relative or co-worker that just has to walk into the room to get you agitated (remember - YOU could be that annoying person!)?

**Content/Relationship Conflict.** This type of conflict combines personality differences with actions and issues, and, for obvious reasons, can be the most difficult to resolve.

A good first step, then, to enhance our business, family, and social contacts is to better understand what conflict is and what it is not. Here are some "truisms" regarding conflict, hopefully dispelling some commonly held beliefs.

**Conflict is natural and normal.** It's how we deal with it that matters.

**Conflict is neutral.** It is neither positive or negative.

**Conflict is not a sign of poor management.** It's just a reality of functioning.

**Not all conflicts can be resolved.** Conflict exists because someone, somewhere gets something out of it by keeping it going.

**Conflict can result from clear communications.** It is most often the result of very clear communication about very real differences.

**Conflict is not a sign of low concern for the organization.** Generally, people defend and protect those areas where deep concern exists, so conflict indicates genuine concern.

**Anger is not necessarily negative and destructive.** Anger is an emotion, neither positive or negative, and is one of many human emotions experienced daily. These emotions indicate caring, and can generate the energy needed to satisfactorily resolve conflict.

**Conflict, if left alone, will not take care of itself.** The intensity of conflict varies. Left unchecked, conflict can escalate as easily as dissipate.

And finally, **not all conflict must be resolved.** Some conflict is best managed by endurance, while some other events require multiple solutions. Moving too quickly toward resolution can sometimes limit success and growth.

Competent managers often become ineffective during conflict, held captive by the Defective Pressure-Cooker syndrome and other myths about the nature of conflict. In a future article, I will explore different ways to come to terms with conflict and resolve it successfully, as well as identifying some of the barriers to doing so. Until then, let's try to get along!

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