

Conflict as Opportunity: A Guide to Managing Difficult Situations



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Experiencing Conflict

- Conflict is commonly perceived as something that:
 - is unwelcome
 - is to be avoided
 - signifies failure or inadequacy



Reactions to Conflict

- As a result, people experiencing conflict often:
 - Ignore it
 - Avoid it
 - Get angry, scared, sad, defiant...
 - Get loud, get quiet, withdraw...
 - Argue, order, threaten...



And Guess What...

- The
- Conflict
- Doesn't
- Go
- Away.



But sometimes the people do...

Research shows that even low levels of disruptive behavior in the workplace impact performance:

- 38% intentionally decreased work quality
- 47% intentionally decreased time at work
- 48% intentionally decreased work effort
- 66% said their performance declined
- 78% said that their commitment to the organization declined
- 80% lost time worrying about the issue.

• *Managing Difficult Employees and Disruptive Behaviors*, Teresa A. Daniel, SHRM Online (April 2012).



What Causes Conflict

- In a word, DIFFERENCES.
- But not necessarily substantive differences. Differences in values, interests, perception, and communication style can all contribute to conflict. Layer on differences in lived experience, social identities, cultural affinities, and personal abilities, and we have an environment in which conflict is inescapable.



Higher Ed Statistics

- In the 2012 Hollis Workplace Bullying in the Academy Survey, approximately 62% of respondents reported experiencing or witnessing workplace bullying within the last 18 months.
- This compares to 37% who reported bullying in corporate workplaces in a comparable study.

Hollis, L. (2012) *Bully in the Ivory Tower: How Aggression and Incivility Erode American Higher Education* citing Namie, G. and Namie, R. (2009). *The bully at work: what you can do to stop the hurt and reclaim your dignity on the job* Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.



Common Examples of Disrespectful Behavior

- Negative body language
- Ignoring/Interrupting
- Ostracism/Exclusion
- Gossip
- Fault-finding; non-constructive criticism
- Hurtful humor/sarcasm
- Condescending or demeaning speech
- Shaming
- Misuse of power/position
- Yelling/Outbursts of anger
- Veiled threats
- Direct threats



And Then There's Email...

- Use of communication technologies is associated with reduced adherence to social norms.
 - Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 7, 321–326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>
- Emails or texts also provide fewer nonverbal cues and no instant feedback to assist the reader.
 - Byron, K. (2008). Carrying too heavy a load? The communication and miscommunication of emotion by e-mail. *The Academy of Management Review*, 33, 309–327. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2008.31193163>



What a Rude Email!:

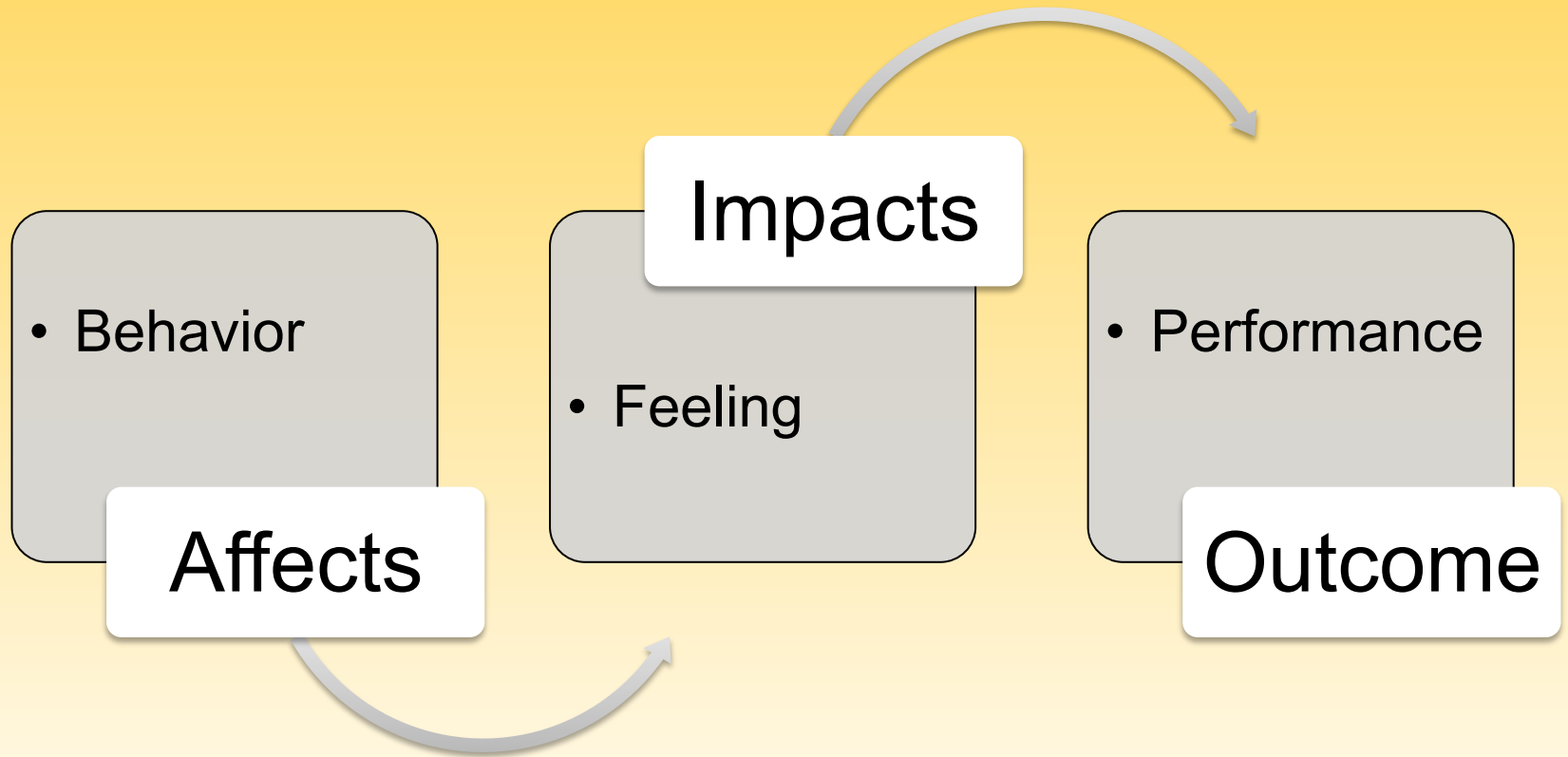
Giumetti's study of the impact of uncivil electronic communication

- Mental, emotional and social energy levels were significantly lower in the uncivil condition.
- Higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect demonstrated in the uncivil condition.
- Experiencing incivility is associated with lower task performance as opposed to experiencing support.
- Giunetti, G. W., Hatfield, A. L., Scisco, J. L., Schroeder, A. N., Muth, E. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (2013). What a rude e-mail! Examining the differential effects of incivility versus support on mood, energy, engagement, and performance in an online context. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 18*(3), 297-309. doi:10.1037/a0032851



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Facts Around Conflict Competency

- 31% of managers think they handle conflict effectively; 78% of their employees disagree.
- 75% of employees report positive outcomes from conflict that would not have been realized without the conflict.
- 95% of those who receive training say that it is the biggest driver for success, but nearly 60% have never received training.
- Sources: 2008 CPP Global Human Capital Report; 2009 Harvard Law School Special Report on Managing Conflict; Cited in *Conflict Management*, Arvis Institute Online 2012.



What stops us from addressing conflict effectively?

- Discomfort with difficult conversations
- Lack of training/preparation
- Role modeling/workplace norms
- Our own needs/motivations/self-confidence
- The perception that it is not “our” responsibility
- Fear
 - Not being taken seriously
 - Being blamed for “making trouble”
 - Hurting someone’s feelings
 - Retaliation



Deconstructing Conflict

See &
Hear

Narrative

Feeling

Action



A Practical Approach to Addressing Conflict

- Ask yourself:
 1. What really happened? Am I seeing the situation objectively?
 2. What was my role in what happened?
 3. Is it worth my attention?
 4. What is the impact on my work/our work?
 5. What is my goal in the conversation?
 6. Am I prepared? When would be the best time and place? What is my attitude?
 7. Should I seek assistance before addressing?



Having a Difficult Conversation

- Be an active listener – seek to understand the other person’s perspective
- Check your narrative at the door; Avoid attribution of motive or intent
- Be willing to acknowledge and express emotions
- Use “I” statements and open-ended questions
- Identify and affirm outcomes



Assertive, Non-Reactive Statements

- I see, I feel, I hope & expect, I will.....
- When you...I feel...because....
In the future, it would be great if....
I wish that....
I will/will not....
- I notice that...and I assume that.... Is that true?
- Why v. What, But v. And
You should v. I would like you to....



University Resources

- Working Better Together (*wbt.umn.edu*)
- Office for Conflict Resolution (*www.ocr.umn.edu*)
- Student Conflict Resolution Center
(*www.sos.umn.edu*)
- Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative
Action (<https://diversity.umn.edu/eoaa/>)
- Student Counseling Services (*www.uccs.umn.edu*)



Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

Winston Churchill



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Thank You

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