



Workshops and Presentations Written Notes and relevant material

By Leigh Nomchong - Psychologist

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Please note that we have undergone changes over the years, hence our letter head can vary at times depending on when the workshop/presentation was run.

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The Program

1. Conflict Resolution
2. Dealing with Difficult People
3. Managing Your Time

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Introduction

Conflict resolution is a process that has gained more attention in recent years as the nature of work has changed. Legislation and social change have brought about different demands and requirements upon people at work, in the context of how they work together. Productivity and job satisfaction are also affected by how people get on in the work place.

Unfortunately, some people do not get along at the workplace. This “not getting on” can vary in degree and occasionally can bring about conflict between staff. Even more unfortunately, due to difficulties in employment these days, its not an option to just leave the job and get another so what has come about is the need for resolution of conflict as it occurs.

This is what we are talking about today

Now for the sake of removing confusion, lets look at the types of conflict that can occur.

Types of Conflict

There are many types of conflict that we experience, some of them are obvious and some of them are subtle. How they affect us is determined by us. That is, what kind of people we are, what we will tolerate and what we will not. This means that what is an issue for one person may not necessarily be an issue for another. Here are some examples of the kinds of conflicts we experience from time to time.

Physical Aggression

This is an obvious kind of conflict that we are all knowledgeable about, in fact we see it on tv all the time. This is often the final step in conflict and occurs when all types of intervention have failed and the issue is highly charged and has been ongoing for some time. If you are not sure what is physical violence, just look at the news on tv.

Mental or Psychological abuse

This is subtle. Mental abuse can range from torture to teasing. How it affects you is very much dependent upon the kind of person you are and the kinds of values and beliefs that you hold and the circumstances

of the situation. For example, listening to the radio can be annoying or it can be a pleasant distraction. If you find it annoying and you are unable to have the radio turned off at work, then over time this issue is going to change from tease and annoyance to torture!

Psychological tensions can be very subtle, but easily build up over time to become problems. So this means that issues left unresolved become very demanding and consume resources and energy beyond what one would normally expect.

Territoriality

This is when someone imposes upon your territory, what ever that may be. This imposition may be physical or psychological. The territory may be at home, with friends, or at work. It may be work related or it may be a social imposition at work.

For example, think of the situation when someone takes over one of your functions within your work, when it was not discussed or agreed by you. This can be quite an issue for some people as they feel that they are losing control or are being sidelined. The issue of perception occurs here, because in this example, its a problem if the person affected sees it as the thin edge of the wedge and that they are being side lined, or it can be seen as a relief because they have so much work on in the first place!

Territoriality is the most common reason that conflicts occur at work. When you think about how we maintain all the territories in our lives it is hardly surprising that we sometimes come into conflict with others.

By territory I mean, that we own our family, we own our jobs, we own our personal space, we own our emotional reactions and opinions, and we protect those things. Its a space we take up. When people say or do things that impinge upon that space, we become affronted and we react. The extent of that reaction depends on the territory, that nature of the impingement and the kind of person we are.

WHY DOES CONFLICT OCCUR?

Obviously, there are lots of reasons why conflict occurs. What is interesting is that there are patterns about conflict and these patterns can be seen more readily when we are aware of certain factors. Lets look at some of these factors:

STRESS

We all suffer stress, but there are times in our lives when that stress becomes overwhelming. We are trying to deal with it as best as possible, of course, but it is still having an adverse effect upon us. Sometimes we become moody or unresponsive. Often we lose our tolerance for others and find ourselves getting irritated with minor issues. We get tetchy.

When we are under pressure we sometimes do and say things, that upon reflection, we would not have done. This can often be because the stress we are under affects our judgment.

Specifically, it affects the frontal lobe of our brain where we make moral decisions and consider the consequences of our actions. Stress can interfere with the normal functioning of the frontal lobe and thus impair some of our judgments.

So, when under stress we can say silly things, misunderstand what we see or hear, or feel overwhelmed by something. At the time we do not often realise that we are doing this, it just becomes apparent later, at which point we usually become quite embarrassed.

EMOTIONALITY

Everyone has emotions. They add colour to our lives. They can be warm, wonderful and reassuring. Unfortunately, they can sometimes have a life of their own, and this can result in us exhibiting behaviour that we later regret. Losing one's temper is a good example of this.

When people lose their temper, they say and do things that they often deeply regret. They can do this for a range of reasons. They are depressed, they feel intimidated or anxious. Or they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Occasionally they come to the attention of the authorities.

HOW TO SEE THE SIGNS

We often don't see the signs that others give us to indicate that they are not happy. This is partly due to the fact that the other person is trying to behave "normally" and partly due to the fact that we are not looking. Yet when you think about it, we are walking beacons of broadcasting information.

Interestingly, today's face recognition software actually relies on this to look for features of persons and patterns in their behaviour. Cameras used for picking up shop lifters in large stores in countries such as America and Europe, are often run by computer, with the computer program designed to look for behavioural patterns, to determine likely shoplifters, which is then directed to the human attendant for closer scrutiny.

There is computer software, via the use of a camera, that can tell if you are lying, based on the expressions on your face and the characteristics of your skin and blood vessels.

So we broadcast information all the time, its just that often the case is that we, as listeners, ignore such broadcasts, and this is where we can get the development of conflicts.

RECOGNISE THE SIGNS

We give out signs all the time. It might be a flushed face, or an embarrassed look, or an agitated manner. It could be lack of reaction, or an inappropriate reaction for the situation. The person could be nervous or apprehensive. Either way the signs are there. All you have to do is have an open mind and look at what is being presented to you.

For example, you don t have to be a psychologist to judge how the other person is reacting, or likely to be feeling. Its simple, just put yourself in their place and see how you would be feeling and reacting.

Often people give out physical signs when they are stressed or upset. They may have a red flush to their face, have pupil dilation, sweat, agitation in their manner, have rapid speech or have a sallow or vacant look. Read the signs and trust your feelings on what you see.

TECHNIQUES IN DEALING WITH CONFLICT

We will deal with techniques in more detail in the next section, “Dealing with Difficult People”, but we can summarise some points here:

- : stay calm - getting upset yourself makes it worse.
- : try & identify the problem
- : a soothing voice works best
- : be patient
- : be vigilant & see it coming

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DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Dealing with difficult people is one of the most exacting experiences one can have. No matter what your role at work you will have to deal with the people of that organisation, and perhaps even worse, other colleagues and related professions. The problem is that not all dealings with all people go according to plan! (The more cynical amongst us could suggest that few dealings with people go according to plan!)

DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Lets clarify that we are not talking about the easy going, warm and friendly individuals that come into our lives from time to time. No, we are talking about the difficult ones. The great time wasters! They love the sound of their own voices! They need to tell every irrelevant fact regarding the issue. They need your total and undivided attention. At the time, they are emotionally driven individuals who are poor time managers. They are consumers of time! They can be stressful, and they can ruin your whole day. But what is worse is that without them we would have no reason to work.

So dealing with difficult people is very important because we need them for our business, and we are supplying them with a service. So, seeing as we have to deal with them, lets look at why are they difficult?

WHY ARE THEY DIFFICULT?

There are a wide range of reasons why people are difficult when we have contact with them. It may be that they are just difficult or it may be that we are dealing with them at a bad time. Or even worse, the problem may be us. But let's look at some other common reasons people become difficult to deal with.

- They have had no previous experience with the issue.** This means exactly what it says. When a person has no familiarity with the topic or issue that they are dealing with, they are often apprehensive, nervous and unsure of themselves. They may become defensive. When people become defensive they can very easily become offensive.

- They may have been traumatised or upset by the issue itself.** People can be very upset by an issue that they feel passion about, and this can destabilise them in many subtle ways, which we are not expecting. The person can appear to be behaving perfectly normal in the discussion that you're having with them and then suddenly, for

no apparent reason, burst into tears and become uncontrollably upset. Or worse, they may become suddenly aggressive and antagonist in their behaviour. You have accidently pressed a button!

- The person may have unreasonable expectations due to a stylized view of your role.** Everyone has expectations. Its just that some of them are unrealistic. However, the holder of such unrealistic expectations often does not know that and will act accordingly.

- They have been badly handled by your staff or a colleague & they are now angry.** In this instance they are out for revenge. They want to make someone pay for their embarrassment, their inconvenience and for any other difficulty that they may be having in life at the time.

- They have no understanding of the working constraints that you operate under.**

- They handle stress by being aggressive.** Simply put, some people handle stress, fear and anxiety by being angry and aggressive. Yes, it is a dysfunctional mechanism for dealing with such pressures, but not everyone thinks logically!

- They are doing this under the instruction of their silent partner.** Not all relationships are fair, open and equal. Sometimes, the person doing the talking is not actually the person making all the decisions, but are simply following instructions from their partner, the decisions may have been made before they spoke you. The problem here is that getting information third hand loses detail, and the spokesperson may be more focused on what their partner wants, then what is to be achieved in a meeting with you.

- There may be cultural differences.** Dealing with a person who has a Western background of experience can be entirely different to dealing with a person who has an Arabic background of experience. To be really different, try some of the African cultures. This means that you may be getting different signals than what you are thinking you are getting.

SOME CLINICAL ISSUES

Of course, the person may be difficult because of mental illness, rather than the points that I have raised above. Let me discuss some of the different Personality disorders and psychopathologies that exist. I should point out that it is widely accepted that only something like one percent of the population is affected by severe mental illness.

- Histrionic Personality, Borderline Personality, Multiple Personality Disorder, Schizophrenia, Dissociation, Agitated Depression, Stress, Anger, Anxiety, (divorce could be considered a clinical condition).

WAYS TO DEAL WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON

Well, it is all well and good to talk about why people are difficult to deal with, but perhaps we should now focus our attention on how to deal with them when they are being difficult. There are no limits to the lengths one can go to, to appease someone else, but for the sake of this exercise we will restrict ourselves to be more pragmatic options available. Although, there are those who would argue that groveling has its merits!

- Understand the problem from their perspective.** Understanding is a key concept in all communications. If you understand why a person is behaving the way they are behaving, it is often easier to deal with them, and to undertake steps to minimise the more adverse effects of their behaviour. You should ask yourself "why is this person behaving this way?", you could also ask yourself "how should I react?".
- Soothe them and be supportive in your manner and language.** Often talking to someone who's upset, in a soothing and relaxed manner, can have the effect of calming them down considerably. It can also set the mood for conversation, give them reassurance and reduce the likelihood of escalation.
- Give them your attention, even if you have many demands upon your time.** Often we are very busy, and there are many demands upon our time. Sometimes, when we have someone in front of us who's competing for those demands, we are tempted to dismiss them quickly so that we can get on with the other many busy things we have to do. For many, this can be like waving a red flag at a bull. Take a little time out, look them in the eye and listen to what they are saying.
- A smile is the best form of non verbal communication.** There has been a lot of material written about non verbal communication.

But, there is no form of non verbal communication that is more effective, and more penetrating, and effective than a smile!

- **I am not the enemy.** Remember what your job is, and remind the other person as well. Sometimes we have to give information to the person that they may not want to hear. Unfortunately, there is no nice way to deliver this information, and it is often the case that the messenger is dealt with in the same way as the message. You need to tell the person that you are on their side, that the message is the problem, not you!

- **Ease the tension, coffee/tea/magazine, but don't overdo it.** Sometimes a simple thing such as offering tea or coffee, or a magazine to read can be sufficient to ease the apparent tension that the person may be suffering. It's also good for customer relations. But, don't overdo it or you may simply overwhelm them.

- **Be assertive but not aggressive.** We hear a lot about assertiveness. There are assertiveness courses that we can do to get in skills of this area. Let me draw your attention to the important difference between being assertive and being aggressive. You are assertive when you take a position that you believe in. You are aggressive when you argue that position, whether the listener likes it or not.

- **If you have to listen,** whether you want to or not, do not give polite feedback, just listen. Sometimes we are faced with a person who is not really talking *to* us, but rather, talking *at* us. With this kind of person it is best not to give feedback, simply listen to what they have to say and wait until the end. Often, this person is not interested in what you have to say and will take any response from you as an indication of dissent, and will simply escalate their attack.

WHEN TO BE ASSERTIVE & WHEN NOT TO

Let me expand a little more on when to be assertive and when not to. Obviously, we have to be selective about what technique we apply in a discussion. There are times when it is a complete waste of time trying to make your point. Best to just let it go, and chalk the matter up to experience!

There is a big difference between being assertive and being aggressive. Ask yourself how important it is to make the point, and whether you are going to convince the other person.

DIFFICULT PEOPLE SUMMARY

Recognise them, understand them, deal with them, do not waste time, be polite, do not lose your temper, debrief from them. And accept that they are part of our work life.

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**MANAGING
YOUR TIME!**

WHAT IS TIME?

In biological terms, we have a 24 hour cycle. On average, we spend 8 hours of it sleeping, generally we spend 8 hours earning a living, the remaining 8 hours we usually devote to our social needs. But this includes working in the garden, carrying out assorted house, car and family repairs, landscaping, going out etc.

By comparison, anthropologists did a study on the Kung Bushmen, the last remaining Hunter/gatherer society in the world. They live in the Kalahari Desert in Africa. It was a longitudinal study done over three years. The study looked at how much time the Kung Bushman devoted to maintaining food, shelter, hunting etc, to exist in the harsh desert environment successfully.

It was found that they spent an average of 3.5 hours per day maintaining their existence. How do you spend your time?

WORK AND TIME MANAGEMENT

The management of time is usually associated with one's behaviour at work. So we will discuss the role of time management at work, but remember that the issues I raise also relate to the rest of your life.

What are some of the aspects of time management that we need to take into account?

PRIORITIES

We all know about priorities. It is part of the human system of coping with demands upon us and meeting those demands with a finite amount of resources. Prioritisation is a way of achieving efficient utilisation of resources. This is another word for work.

Priorities are determined on a range of factors:

- Importance of the task
- Forced level priority (by superior)
- Ease of completion of the task
- Minimisation of later adverse problems,

The listing of priorities is a personal thing. We make judgments on the basis of our preferences, prejudices, fear (of failure) and skill. Making priorities is learnt behaviour i.e. it is a skill developed over time with practice!

GOALS:

When we have no clear direction, that is no goals, we tend to waste a lot of time and squander resources. However, many people do not assign goals as they are fearful that if they assign goals they will fail them. Never the less, goals clarify direction and help us spend our time wisely.

Again, goal identification is a personal issue, but has the same factors affecting it as does Priorities. Goals can be small and short term, large and long term, AND contradictory! Long term goals often generate a series of short goals, which appear as incremental stages to achieving the long term goal. Goals are important in time management.

Formal vs Informal Goals – Formal is the stated mission statement of the organisation, and Informal is when there is a hidden agenda.

DECISION MAKING:

There are many decisions that we make, but they all involve the same process. What differs is the subject matter and magnitude of the decision. Some people are phobic of making decisions because they are fearful of the potential adverse consequences. This leads to them being overwhelmed and the person vacillates and becomes immobilised.

Decision making can be logically or emotionally driven. E.g. Logic – do this as it makes sense. Emotion – a divorce case. Discuss problem solving vs worry.

TIME MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS

- Diary systems
- Filofax systems
- Computer systems such as PIMS
- Project Management Systems.

MANAGEMENT STYLES

The office environment is a complex one. There are many variables to cater too and we need strategies to cater to them.

Managing down the line – There is no clear, workable technique. This is a matter of style, which reflects the culture of management. Style covers how one delegates, what one delegates, how one follows up delegated work, who to delegate too. It's also a matter of working with the capability of subordinate staff.

Managing upwards – this is exactly what it means. Sometimes we have to manage our superiors. Sometimes they are not always good managers (but they are the boss), sometimes our superiors are not aware of our needs and need to be educated by us. Sometimes superiors quite literally do not have the knowledge that we have.

PEOPLE WHO WASTE OUR TIME:

There are people in our work who waste our time or use it up for themselves. Be on the lookout for these people. There are various types of personality traits that affect our management of time. The following Personality traits are simplistic so recognise that you cannot catalogue all of your colleagues solely on the following traits.

PERFECTIONIST – this person has to do everything absolutely right. They spend an enormous amount of time and resources completing tasks to the point where they are perfect and beyond criticism. They spend resources far beyond the value of the task. And they get irritated with you if you don't do the same, or you stop them working the way they want too.

- Do not cooperate with this person, they will hate you, but you will not waste time
- Do not cater to their needs, do not give in
- Be polite, firm and unyielding

PANICKER – this person runs around the office in a state of crisis. They create a sense of urgency, they are overwhelmed by the task, They sake papers, they use this as a badge of honour to justify a range of factors (failure, reduced success, recognition of their importance).

- This is NOT your problem
- Deny that it is your problem
- Give the problem back to them

PROBLEM MAKER – this person is good at making their problems, your problems. They are very skilled at convincing you that you should own the problem and therefore, get you to take the problem on for them

THE BOSS – he/she is a problem! They determine workloads, goals, directions, and they can be a panicker and problem maker! But they have the authority to be so.

- You need to manage upwards (nicely).

SUMMARY

Managing your time is achieved by understanding what you are trying to achieve, what you are trying to achieve it with, and not wasting your time.

There are various factors to take into account when trying to manage your time, and these are:

- Prioritisation
- Goals – Formal Vs Informal
- Decision Making
- Time Management Mechanisms
- Management styles
- Stress management
- And dealing with others i.e. the various personality traits of those around us

How do I cope at the end of the day?

MANAGING YOUR STRESS, NOT STRESS MANAGEMENT

Not only do we have to cope through the day, but we have to cope enough at the end of the day that we can go home and wind down, and not traumatise or harass our families. Let's talk about some of the ways we can wind down from a day of dealing with difficult people.

- **Affirmations** - this is part of the self talk mechanism that we use on a day-to-day basis to make decisions. Cast your mind back to the last time you bought something. If you remember, you will recall that the thinking process involved in the decision-making, as to whether to purchase or not, was almost like having an internal conversation in your head. This is how affirmations work. In the context of this seminar, you need to tell yourself a series of affirmations, every day, that clarify what actually happened in the day.
- **Relaxation & stress management** - obviously, the best thing to do at the end of the day is to wind down, and carry out other good stress management techniques.
- **Exercise and good diet** - we are what we eat! If you eat junk all day, then it will be no surprise how you will feel towards the end of the day. Many people are surprised at what little fatigue they feel when they eat proper food through the day and drink lots of water. Try it!
- **Cuddle your pet** - if you do not have a pet to cuddle, you can always stoop to cuddling your spouse or children. Whatever, cuddle someone or something - it helps!
- **Remind yourself of your control in your life** - the only way you can lose control in your life is if you give that control away. The only way someone can have power over you, is if you give them that power.
- **Whose problem is it?** - it doesn't hurt to remind your self that at the end of the day it's not your problem!
- **The value of debriefing** - there is nothing more therapeutic than having a good old bitch to someone about your day.