



Conflicts in companies and organisations

Fair-weather management - every manager's pipe dream. And what does reality look like? Storms are followed by sunshine and blizzards alternate with thaw periods.

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We are still not able to regulate and influence the external climate, however, when it comes to the work climate, leaders and managers have a large scope for action as well as influence. Are these opportunities also always used and what external support can executives draw on?

The ideal situation

The company is up and running, all the staff are working effectively in the right places, the employee turnover is extremely low, new orders are being generated almost on their own and the company is growing continuously:

Fair-weather management - the pipe dream of every manager. In contrast to this, conflict management is a horror scenario for many leaders.

Pay close attention to the weather conditions

Conflicts are a part of life, like clothes when you go out of the house. When working together in companies and organisations, conflicts are inevitable, because personal needs, sensitivities and interests collide.

Conflicts per se are not anything negative - the same can be said of an airy summer dress. It only becomes inappropriate when the external circum-

stances and the weather conditions are not taken into account. The approach to conflicts - avoiding them and dealing with them - requires just the same vigilance and foresight in order to be prepared and ready accordingly. Those who follow the weather report experience fewer surprises. Conscious management by leaders makes a vital contribution to conflict prevention.



The neutral outside view of external consultants can point out the key features of conflict avoidance. Drawing on the support of consultants is particularly advisable if the leaders themselves are involved in conflicts. This is because an administrative vacuum at top management level allows conflicts to grow rapidly and without control. Professional monitoring, support and an analysis of the work climate can make a considerable contribution to conflict prevention.

Avoiding conflict through skilful planning at the strategic and operational levels

The extent to which employees are able to provide specific input during

the operational planning stages determines how trouble-free the subsequent work process will be. In the course of this, the ability of the employees to identify themselves with the company along with their commitment will increase continuously. Getting employees to participate in the planning phase means that the target definition, division of competencies, responsibilities and the division of tasks will be accepted right from the start. These development processes can be facilitated and supported by external consultants. Great successes have been observed in the course of this, because acceptance of and trust in the consultants constitute a key factor for motivating in the planning phase.

Conflict avoidance through skilful management

Management behaviour that obscures or involves too much rigidity can be a trigger for organisational conflicts. If staff have the feeling that the line managers are not prepared to deviate from principles once they have been adopted and that they also reject any constructive dialogue, then communication is reduced to a minimum and staff distance themselves internally from the company. Hostile coalitions against the line managers and the company are the consequences of such

behaviour. Then again, managing the staff in a way that is too hesitant, or too fearful can also lead to escalation. This dance on a volcano between proximity and distance to the staff is one that is performed by many leaders. Skilful leadership also means being aware of your personal conflict behaviour. What is my conflict style and how professional are my actions in extreme situations?

With the help of analysis tools both personal conflict style and conflict behaviour can be elucidated, as well as the conflict styles and conflict behaviour of staff members - a crucial step towards conflict avoidance.

Conflict avoidance through skilful monitoring

Monitoring ensures that conflicts are avoided and not provoked. Conflicts arise when the monitoring function breaks down. Unfortunately, many leaders shy away from calling their staff to account and having a critical discussion about inadequate performance. Yet, a lack of supervision creates a destructive climate in a company.

Conflicts are characterised by three main elements:

- Mutual target obstruction
- Interdependency of those involved
- Harming of relationships

These are the most important starting points for leaders where they can apply strategies for identifying conflicts at an early stage.

Employee satisfaction surveys, which are carried out at regular intervals in the company, are a potential management tool with which the leaders can

also be carefully monitored. However, these studies are only ever as good as the subsequent follow up - they have to be taken seriously and changes have to be implemented. Backing from an external consultant provides essential support for this process, as a consultant does not suffer from "corporate tunnel vision".

When there is a weather warning help is available via mediation

When there are conflicts and disagreements, the entire functional capability of a department, or even the entire business suffers. Frequently, leaders are no longer able to manage and settle these conflicts by themselves. External consultants can analyse and prepare appropriate conflict management strategies. When managing conflicts, leaders adopt a different position to that of external consultants.

The mediator as an external conflict consultant

Once conflicts have escalated to the extent that both parties, or the leader, no longer see a possibility for having a constructive joint discussion then a mediator can help to halt the escalation and, subsequently, to achieve a settlement of the conflict.

In such a case, holding separate discussions with each party at the beginning and compiling the outcomes of the respective discussions as well as the interests and needs have proven to be effective. In the course of this, together with each party to the conflict, the mediator focuses on those facts that can be adjusted. Gradually, as the different points of view are examined, the willingness by the parties to make concessions increases. The

goal of the mediator is to dismantle barriers to communication, to create a willingness for consensus, to become acquainted with the values of the other parties and to respect these. A settlement that regulates working together and coexistence, which will be viable in the future, is worked out in equal measure by both parties to the conflict. The advantages of a neutral and unbiased conflict intermediary are the maximum acceptance of and initial trust placed in the mediator.

Identifying conflicts at an early stage and successful intervention in serious cases saves costs and contributes to a company's productivity. If a professional approach is taken, then these temporary disruptions can also create new opportunities. In such cases, these are referred to as conflict benefits, which are reflected in the restructuring of old work processes, or in the new quality of teamwork.

About the author:



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Lisa Solta is trainer, coach, mediator and studied consulting sciences and management of social systems. Training and coaching mean to hear getting active, being active and staying active. By a number of methods, professional expertise and extensive knowledge in medium-sized companies and in the retail sector, transfer and sustainable success are being secured.