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WESTERN PAINTING & COATINGS CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION

Building on Your Management Skills: Conflict Management

Conflict management is the process of identifying and handling conflicts in a rational, effective, and impartial manner. As you're aware, conflicts are inevitable. We frequently have to address conflicts throughout our daily lives - with friends, family, and in our professional lives. In our competitive job market, we have no choice but to prove how valuable we are to a company, even if it leads to conflict. Disputes are bound to happen when people of different backgrounds, opinions, and personalities are brought together with a shared business goal. For that reason, employers highly value leaders with strong conflict management skills. Leaders who embrace conflict are able to reach a resolution before the problem escalates. Thus, cultivating your conflict management skills will serve you well during the course of your career as well as in your personal life.

Recognizing Conflict

The faster you're able to identify a conflict, the faster it's resolved. As a leader, it's important to look for signs of conflict rather than relying exclusively on people reporting a problem. Common signs of conflict include behavioral changes, slowed productivity, lack of trust, anxiety, and a high staff turnover rate. It's critical to be aware of those signs and take action immediately if you suspect conflict.

Understanding Conflict

In order to resolve a conflict, you must thoroughly understand it. Ask yourself - *What type of conflict is this? What has caused this conflict? Who's involved? Is there a deeper issue than what's been presented to me?* The way you understand the conflict greatly influences your approach to finding a solution. While there are many causes of conflicts in the workplace, a few examples include personality differences, poor communication, unmet needs, lack of resources, contrasting work methods, competing job duties, and conflict of values. It's also important to recognize that the conflict might be the result of a much deeper issue than how it appears to be at first glance. For instance, an argument that arises over who gets to complete a specific assignment might stem from a deeper sense of rivalry between the two employees, which in turn would require an alternate approach than just delegating tasks differently. Gather all the information you can before strategizing your conflict resolution.

Managing Conflict

While your approach differs on the circumstances of the conflict, there are a few tips that leaders should implement in their conflict-resolution strategies:

1. **Exhibit Empathy** - Empathy is key to establishing trust. Acknowledge your team's feelings and provide an understanding of where they're coming from in this conflict.
2. **Eliminate Biases** - As a leader, it's critical to be self-aware and acknowledge your biases to be able to detach from them and focus on the real issue at hand.
3. **Actively Listen** - Sometimes your team just wants to be heard. Actively listening to each perspective of the conflict will not only create a shared understanding of the issue, but it'll also reduce the tension and defensiveness, allowing for an effective resolution to take place.
4. **Know When To Involve HR** - Once you've exhausted all your resources provided by the organization's conflict-management policies and procedure manual, it's important to hand over the issue to HR. The HR department will be able to guide and develop an appropriate plan with a set timeline and expectations.

Bottom Line: Conflict in the workplace is uncomfortable and addressing it might feel even more uncomfortable, but ignoring the problem won't make it go away. An organizational structure that openly communicates and handles conflicts efficiently cultivates a healthier work environment and an improved company culture. Leadership roles and conflict management go hand in hand, it's part of the job. Start building your conflict-management skills by researching effective strategies and consider training courses - with a strong foundation, the rest will follow!