advice chief

Poor communication isn't the source of most conflicts

By Jeff "Chief" Urbaniak
COLUMNIST (www.AdviceChief.com)

Over the years some managers have told me the primary source of their work-related conflicts was "poor communication." When I'd look into the matter, I'd hear things from people like "my boss gives ambiguous directions," "my employees don't listen," and "I can't get people to talk to each other." These comments are not unusual. Most people do think that communication is the source of most conflicts. But they'd be wrong. In a work context, more conflicts come from structural relationships and personal differences than communication per se.

First, organizations create job descriptions, specialized work groups, jurisdictional borders, and authority relationships--all with the intent to facilitate coordination. But in doing so, they separate people and unintentionally create the potential for conflicts. For instance, departments within organizations have diverse goals. Purchasing is concerned with the timely acquisition of materials and supplies at low prices, marketing's goals concentrate on disposing finished goods and services and increasing revenues, quality control's attention is focused on improving quality and ensuring that the organization's products meet standards, and production units seek efficiency of operations by maintaining a steady production flow. When groups within an organization seek diverse ends or compete internally for monetary resources, there is increased potential for conflict.

Second, did you ever meet individuals to whom you took an immediate disliking? Most of the opinions they expressed, you disagreed with. Even insignificant characteristics--the way they cocked their head when they talked or smirked when they smiled--annoyed you. We've all met people like that. And many of us have to work or have worked with people whose values or personality clash with our own.

Third, today's organizations are increasingly diverse in terms of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. So, not surprisingly, employees differ on the importance they place on general values such as honesty, responsibility, equality, and ambition. They also differ on job-related values such as the importance of family over work or freedom versus authority. These differences often surface in work-related interactions and create significant interpersonal conflicts.

Now this doesn't mean that communication can't be the source of conflict. It can. Differing word connotations, jargon, insufficient exchange of information, poor listening skills, and the like create conflicts. But the notion that "we can resolve our differences if we just communicate more" is not necessarily true. In fact in some instances, evidence actually demonstrates that the potential for conflict increases when there is too much communication as well as when there's too little. Apparently, an increase in communication is functional up to a point, whereupon it's possible to over-communicate. I can't tell you how many times I've been "communicated to death!"

So when you're trying to manage conflicts, take a thoughtful look at their source. It's more likely that the conflict is coming from work-imposed requirements, dissimilar values, or personality differences than it is from poor communication. And that should influence the angle of the action(s) you take to resolve the conflict.

~ The End ~