Course Learning Outcomes for Unit II

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

4. Develop a human resource plan to address employee conflict.
   4.1 Identify your conflict management style.
   4.2 Describe how to handle a workplace investigation.
   4.3 Develop a process to resolve conflict.

Reading Assignment

In order to access the following resources, click the links below:


Unit Lesson

Introduction to Addressing Employee Conflict

In order to access the following resource, click the link below.


To view the transcripts for this video, click here.

No matter where you work, even if it is from the sanctity of your own home, workplace and life conflicts are unavoidable. In real-life situations, you do not get the opportunity to take back what you say, but there is a technique that allows you to stop and rewind or reflect on an interaction. This technique is a part of a conflict management tool developed by Chris Argyris and popularized in the book The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization; the technique is called the ladder of inference.
The Ladder of Inference

Have you ever made an assumption, acted on it, and found yourself embarrassed or ashamed of your actions because you were way off base or missing vital information? You are not alone; we all make incorrect judgements from time to time, but we can avoid these conflicts and improve our communications by learning to use the ladder of inference model (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994).

Please watch award-winning author Ed Muzio describe the ladder of inference model by clicking the link in the reference below.


Click here to access the transcript for this video.

While we can make bad judgments by jumping from data within our perception of beliefs to actions based on assumptions, we can also learn to use the model to avoid these jumps by checking our assumptions before we misjudge or create a workplace conflict. If conflict does occur, this model may be used by employees to retrace their steps, check their assumptions, and unravel the conflict themselves (Senge et al., 1994). There are times, however, when a human resources (HR) professional must intervene with a thorough workplace investigation.

Workplace Investigations

Today’s supervisors spend one fifth of their time dealing with employee conflicts (Ramsey, 2005). These arguments often distract daily schedules, demoralize the environment, and jeopardize productivity. They can lead to unsafe and aggressive hostilities. When these conflicts are not addressed, the tension spreads throughout the workplace, and the issues become everybody’s problem.

Causes of these conflicts vary; causes can range from increased stress and competition to frequent restructuring, downsizing, and mergers. Workers are asked to do more with fewer resources, and the stress causes frustration and anger as well as job insecurity. In an unstable work environment, it does not take much to ignite an argument due to false impressions based on generational differences, race or cultural differences, narrow-mindedness, discrimination, or other perceived injustices. Supervisors must intervene when conflict, such as employees refusing to cooperate or share information, is disruptive to the workforce (Ramsey, 2005).

If the conflict is a common topic of conversation in the workplace or it is brought to the attention of management or human resources (HR), it is time for management and HR to get involved.

There are several excellent strategies for investigating workplace conflicts, such as harassment, in the required reading materials. We will discuss the minimum actions that need to take place and current changes to the laws that are affecting the investigation process.

If your company receives a complaint, whether formal or informal, it must promptly be given to the individual who will review and investigate the complaint. If it is deemed that there is a threat to the employee or environment, a decision to suspend the alleged harasser must be made while the investigation takes place (Below & Ptasznik, 2014).

The following individuals should be interviewed: the employee who made the complaint, the alleged harasser, and any witnesses identified as relevant or as having information related to the situation. When interviewing, allow the individuals to explain what happened without interrupting. Check facts for clarity by using the four W questions: Who? What? When? Where? Obtain dates and names of witnesses as well as any documentation, if available (Below & Ptasznik, 2014; Woska, 2013).

Interview with the employee who made the complaint: Inform the employee who made the complaint that he or she will not be subject to retaliation. You can advise, if it is company policy, that any individual will be reprimanded for filing a false complaint.
Ask the employee who made the complaint what type of solution he or she is looking for during or after the investigation.

Ask him or her to write a statement explaining the facts of the situation. Do not promise complete confidentiality, however, as the information will be shared on a need-to-know basis (Below & Ptaszni, 2014).

**Interview with the alleged harasser:** Relate each occurrence of the alleged harassment, and give him or her an opportunity to respond. Then, get the alleged harasser to provide his or her version of the facts along with any documentation related to the situation that supports it. Finally, get any names of employees whom the investigator should interview, and explain why (Below & Ptaszni, 2014).

**Interview with the witness(es):** Provide the witness with a general overview of the complaint. Do not give any details. Ask the witness to provide any information regarding the complaint and to describe any unsuitable behavior that he or she has witnessed. Advise the witness that he or she will not be subject to retaliation (Below & Ptaszni, 2014; Woska, 2013).

It is very important that you do not ask if the witness has talked to anyone else about the issues; if the witness has spoken to someone else, it is essential that you do not ask who was spoken to and when the communication occurred. Also, do not advise the witness that the interview is confidential.

According to Smith (2012), it was determined by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that employees cannot be prohibited from discussing investigations. The NLRB determined that this violates the employee’s rights under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). The act protects concerted activities among union and nonunion employees.

According to the NLRB (as cited by Smith, 2012), if employers want to request confidentiality, there needs to be specific concerns—not generalized concerns about the lack of confidentiality. Legitimate concerns, according to the NLRB, include the following issues: there is a need for protection of witnesses, there is a danger that evidence will be destroyed, there is a danger that testimony will be fabricated, and there is a need for prevention against a cover-up (Smith, 2012).

Here is the dilemma: The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), on the other hand, requires employers investigating complaints of sexual harassment to keep the investigation confidential! This is explained in the article titled “NLRB Rejects Common Practices; What is HR to Do?” that is located in your required reading for this unit.

Equally important is the required reading that provides an update on the EEOC’s newly proposed guidance on retaliation, which takes an aggressive stance against retaliation (Smith, 2016). This required reading was released in 2016 with the goal of keeping organizations up to date on retaliation laws. For example, retaliation against employees for discussing compensation may violate EEO laws and the NLRA; this connection may not even occur to the employer. An employer’s most reliable defense against claims of retaliation are consistency in the application of policies and well-documented discipline (Smith, 2012).

**References**


Suggested Reading

In order to access the following resources, click the links below:

People’s styles of handling conflict differ. It is important to understand the different styles and implications of each style. These articles delve into that topic.


Social media has introduced new issues to the HR field. This article explores privacy issues surrounding employees’ social media postings.


The book mentioned in the Unit II Lesson is a classic resource in the field of human resource management, and it is a staple for any HR professional’s library; if you are interested in owning the book, you may research the book on the Internet using the information below. The book focuses on learning disabilities that organizations face, and it recommends ways to rid the organization of them by creating new patterns of thinking.


Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

Non-graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.

Check for Understanding: Word Search Puzzle

Click here to download a word search puzzle that reinforces the terms covered in this unit. You can print it out or use the highlighting or drawing tools to circle the words directly on the PDF document.