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Resolving Conflict

When people interact, conflict is always a possibility. It happens with family, friends and colleagues. It is part of human nature. The workplace can be an abundant ground for conflict. People have different priorities and conflicting work styles. Co-workers can find themselves competing against one another for assignments or advancement. A person can get upset over what seems trivial to them but to another individual at that particular time, it is significant. People get into conflicts when they believe that someone or something is interfering with their achieving a desired goal. Often the source of conflict may be unexpected change or change that has not been fully communicated. Differing styles and values can give rise to conflict and affect the way we respond to conflict.

No matter the source of the conflict, the actual cause of the dispute is often perception and miscommunication. In a perfect world, when a dispute arises the two parties would meet, get an understanding of each side's view, come to a mutually agreeable solution/compromise and move forward. However, people often avoid conflict by not discussing the issue, perhaps resulting in anger and resentment.

Anna Maravelas, psychologist and author of *How to Reduce Workplace Conflict and Stress* describes anger as coming in two flavors—"hot and cold contempt." The concept of hot contempt is the person who is visibly angry with red face and bulging veins. The concept of cold contempt is the more common occurrence: gossip, back-stabbing, withdrawal, simmering resentment, and the desire to see others fail. Neither of these options is good for an organization. We certainly don't want people visibly angry or upset in the work environment, but cold contempt is no better. According to

research done by vitalsmarts.com, every unaddressed conflict wastes about eight hours of company time in gossip and other unproductive activities. Multiply that by all the unresolved conflict in the workplace and the detrimental effects on the organization become clear.

What can you do as the supervisor/manager? For starters, communicate often during times of change and reorganization. If you're not using official forms of communication, "unofficial" chains of communication will emerge. If you have team members that are engaged in a conflict, encourage them to talk and listen to each other. Often people really do just want to be heard. When disruptions are occurring or conflicts do not appear to be getting resolved, or if you yourself are involved in a conflict, don't ignore it and hope it will go away. It won't. Human Resources staff can help by coaching you on how to resolve a conflict, mediating the conflict, clarifying rules and guidelines, or by providing guidance on how to handle grievances.

Conflict is not always a negative; it can also be an opportunity. Allowing an atmosphere where it is okay to disagree encourages inclusion and fosters a diverse environment. While conflict itself isn't necessarily bad, disputes that are poorly handled or not handled at all tend to fester and, while they may not always be on the surface, they don't go away. Not paying attention to what lies below the surface can have detrimental consequences. Being able to approach conflict openly and move forward from conflict can build a better and stronger relationship. If you need assistance resolving or mediating conflict, please contact Human Resources at employee.relations@pinellascounty.org, or call 464-3506.