

# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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## The Insider's Edge

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**W**ho is best situated to intervene in workplace conflict? Some organizations answer that question by emphasizing that managers and supervisors are to intervene directly in disputes within their areas of responsibility. Other organizations see a benefit in retaining the services of "outsiders" or external dispute resolution agencies and consultants. A third alternative is to utilize a "designated insider," an individual skilled in conflict intervention who is part of the organization, but not part of the particular department or issue in dispute.

While each approach has its advantages, I am impressed with the potential of a designated insider to round out an organization's dispute resolution initiatives. I am not suggesting that managers or colleagues should not play a role in resolving conflict within their lines of responsibility. Nor do I suggest that external agencies should not play a role in resolving disputes within organizations. However, there may be situations when intervention by someone who is outside a department or work group, but inside the organization, may be more effective.

Recently I was called into a mid-sized department at my university. The department director expressed concerns over the apparent inability of the staff within one unit to "get along" and described bickering, gossip, absenteeism and emotional outbursts.

A direct supervisor had attempted, on several occasions, to identify the concerns and rectify the situation. This was an experienced supervisor who saw the problems, clearly wanted to help and tried his best.

Not only did the supervisor's attempts to rectify the problem fail, things began to get worse. Staff performance, and thus customer

service, was negatively affected. Frustrated with the staff's behavior and low morale, the department director requested my assistance.

I began meeting with the staff in small groups, inviting them to identify their difficulties and possible causes. Two things became apparent through these meetings. First, the source of the group's difficulties appeared to be among only four staff members. Second, I was able to identify one reason why the supervisor was not effective in his attempts at intervention. The supervisor had recently introduced some departmental changes. Response to the changes varied widely with some staff disliking the changes, which they saw as disruptive, and with others accepting them.

Discussions on the changes led to arguments among the four individuals at the center of the conflict. The arguments generated ill will that spilled over into other areas of their day-to-day contact. The supervisor's intervention attempts focused on the spillover behavior, not the root of the conflict.

I conducted a series of mediation sessions where the four staff members talked to one other about the impact the changes had on them individually, and discussed their frustrations with the changes and with each other. Sharing perspectives on the recent changes led to discussions on other past workplace concerns.

After three sessions on a broad range of issues, the supervisor joined the group. The supervisor heard the staff's concerns about the changes, as well as plans on how they were going to work together now. These plans included ways of responding to emotional behavior, strategies for handling gossip and conflict, and ideas on how to improve departmental morale.

This intervention worked because the department director and the supervisor realized barriers existed that limited their ability to effectively respond to this situation. The availability of a designated insider gave them the opportunity to bring expertise to this situation. The department director could confidentially ask questions, articulate concerns and check perceptions without committing to a course of action or an expenditure of funds.

Obtaining assistance from outside the organization would pose greater barriers. The process of selecting and contracting outside service and justifying expenditures contributes to making the outside contract cumbersome. Those of us who have worked as mediators have, more often than not, thought to ourselves "if only I would have had a chance to work with the parties when this whole thing began." The interests of an organization are no different. We want to ensure that we are in a position to respond quickly to difficult situations.

Insiders can facilitate this quick access to their services. Because of his or her placement within the organization, the insider can provide education on services, while working to strengthen ongoing relations

within the organization. Raising insider's visibility and reinforcing credibility are key to ensuring quick access. People see great value in picking up the phone and speaking informally and confidentially with a knowledgeable colleague regarding a concern. They also trust the advice, knowing that it is provided with a solid understanding of the organizational culture. Outsiders are limited in terms of accessibility, visibility and possibly perceived credibility. Managers and supervisors can be limited by their lack of conflict intervention experience and skill base, proximity to the conflict, perceived partiality and the barriers to full disclosure of staff to their supervisor.

The designated insider can combine the best of both worlds, being familiar, credible, visible, neutral, accessible, skilled and confidential. However, the designated insider should not be viewed as the sole intervention option for those difficult and long-standing problems that management does not want to handle, nor as the place where disputants automatically go when they have a concern. A credible designated insider needs to be seen as complementing management in carrying out its responsibility to attend to the needs of the employees, and to assist the employees in responding to difficult situations. Narrowly defining the role of the insider and limiting the scope of intervention reduces the benefits. The insider's role should be flexible and allow for a broad range of third-party assistance.

My present work as a designated insider is as much a matter of evolution as of conscious design. Although my current job of Coordinator of Ethical Behavior and Human Rights gives me a fairly senior position on campus, people probably see me as more outside the hierarchy than as a part of it. The individual to whom I report also allows me a lot of autonomy.

The potential for me to be seen as a credible source of help is enhanced by the fact that I came into the position with a decade of previous experience dealing with campus conflict as student mediator, Ombuds and staff relations coordinator. These experiences afforded me a wide range of contacts and relationships in the university, making it more natural for people to turn to me when they need assistance. Ultimately, this kind of perceived legitimacy and credibility may be more important than any particular structural arrangement.

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