

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 5, Number 1, Sept 2004

Promoting Better Resolution of Conflict with "Learn for Free!"

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When you teach conflict management in a cost-recovery unit, how can you satisfy your desire to freely spread the word of a better way to resolve disagreements--while at the same time keeping an eye on the bottom line?

The Dalhousie University College of Continuing Education in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has offered a [Negotiation and Conflict Management Certificate Program](#) since 1996. Knowledge of the demographics of our region and workshop participants led us to believe that there were groups of people who could benefit from better approaches to managing conflict, but they were not attending our workshops. One obvious reason for their absence is lack of training dollars. Our three-day foundation workshops are currently priced at \$845, which is inaccessible to many individuals and smaller organizations in our region.

We decided to offer a "Learn for Free!" day. It is a model that was developed in the early 90's to promote the non-credit computer courses at our former Henson College, and to encourage prospective students to "take us for a test drive." Quite simply, Learn for Free! is a day of one-hour sessions—each of which provides a glimpse into the content of our workshops, the expertise of our instructors, and the skills we seek to develop.

The objectives of Learn for Free! are to expand our reach with an alternative approach to handling conflict, to boost our profile within the community, to provide a service to the community in which we live, and to attract new workshop registrants.

To meet these objectives, two components are critical: (1) promotion of the program, workshops, and instructors by providing information verbally and in print form and (2) ensuring that in each session, participants either learn a new conflict management strategy, or have the opportunity to practice a strategy in a different situation. (Sessions are not overviews or summaries of workshop content.)

Of course the entire day is based on the premise that instructors will support the idea and that a number of them will be available to teach a session. Because it is only an hour, it has been fairly easy to recruit instructors. They enjoy the casual atmosphere and the opportunity to be of service to the community. They also realize that it is in their best interest to recruit new students.

The format of the day is kept simple. We use our Negotiation and Conflict Management Certificate Program workshop titles for session titles. We attempt, with mixed success, to obtain the topic of each session from instructors prior to the day and add it to the information available on the website.

Each session starts on the hour, and participants come and go throughout the day. Each session runs 50 minutes, with the first 10 minutes including a welcome, introduction of instructor, and an overview of where the content of the session fits in the certificate program. Thirty-five minutes is spent teaching, and we ensure that each instructor is clear that this must include the application of a skill. The skill would be one actually taught in the three-day negotiation workshop, or a component of the skill. For example, in the session "Negotiation: Focus on Interests", we would introduce the five steps of interest-based negotiation, then discuss the differences between interests and positions. We might then present a short written scenario and have participants work in small groups to practice their understanding of the concept by sharing what they believe to be the interests of the parties. The instructor would add value by exposing some of the deeper, possibly overlooked, interests. The instructor invites questions in the final five minutes. There is then a 10-minute break while the next instructor sets up.

Twenty-six people attended our last Learn for Free! in November 2003. Sixteen people registered for the entire day, while five registered for only the morning, and another five for only the afternoon. Since it's free, some people will register and not show up. To compensate, we overbook by about 40%.

Participants included three regional training directors. These folks found the day very helpful, as it provided them with firsthand knowledge about the program which they could use in advising employees and managers on training choices.

In analyzing the data later, we discovered there were 16 participants from our own university. A free opportunity to learn alternative dispute resolution strategies is very popular on our campus where training dollars are in short supply but disagreements are not. The format is appealing as the time away from work can be justified by the content. As well, it provides a relaxing opportunity to socialize with campus and community colleagues.

Our next Learn for Free! is scheduled for September 2004. We continue to see this event as a low-cost way to address our desire to spread the word about interest-based negotiation and also attract workshop registrations in a format that showcases one of our program's unique resources—our instructors.

If you would like additional information, I'd be happy to answer your questions. Please call Susan Holmes, Associate Professor, Dalhousie University College of Continuing Education, 902-494-6430 or susan.holmes@dal.ca

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