
Conflict Management

Practicing Conflict Management Can Reduce Organizational Stressors

By David Antonioni

Reorganization, downsizing, and budget cuts are familiar words to managers these days. As a result of organizational shifts, managers are experiencing new demands of changing roles and modified work expectations. Individuals often respond to these demands with negative stress reactions such as anxiety, difficulty sleeping, tiredness, and irritability.

Negative stress reactions are avoidable. According to Hans Seyle, a renowned scholar of stress management, stress is experienced when individuals question whether they have the resources to respond to the demands or changes they face. If they perceive the gap between demands and resources as too big, they may feel incapable of meeting the demands. On the other hand, if managers believe they have the resources to handle potential problems, such as constructive stress management strategies, they can respond to stressors in a positive and functional manner.

Current situation for managers

Managers have been experiencing turbulent organizational changes for the last 10 years. As a result of downsizing, management positions have been reduced in most organizations. Since 1985, more than 1.5 million managers have lost their jobs or had their positions redefined into non-management positions. Downsizing, mergers, budget cuts, declining markets, introduction of new technology, and reorganization have evoked feelings of job insecurity, which lead to stress. Managers who survive organizational downsizing generally have to do more work with fewer staff members and, therefore, may be experiencing an increased workload and time pressure to produce results. Managers are expected to continue meeting performance goals even after the organization has laid off a significant number of the workforce. In addition, their roles change due to new goals of employee empowerment and increased use of self-directed teams. The transition to new roles is difficult for some and, in some cases, causes role ambiguity and role conflict.

The study

A study was conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison to investigate how surviving middle managers from downsized organizations handle stressors related to organizational changes. One hundred and forty-five managers—averaging 10 years of managerial experience, 70 percent male, 30 percent female, 59 percent manufacturing, 41 percent service—were asked to complete a 16-item survey at the beginning of seminars on managing organizational change. The survey assessed the extent to which they experienced four stressors believed to be associated with organizational changes:

- **Role conflict**—when managers have to work under incompatible policies or guidelines or are expected to do things that clash with their own principles or expectations;

- **Role ambiguity**—when managers are unclear about their role(s), lack clear information about what is expected of them, or are uncertain about the limits of their authority;

- **Work overload**—when a manager has too much work to do in too little time; and

- **Time pressure**—when managers feel they can not complete work within an imposed deadline.

The survey also assessed the extent to which managers engage in conflict management behaviors in the workplace. Conflict management was defined as using assertive communication to discuss problems (stressors) with key individuals and find solutions that are satisfactory to both parties.

Results

A statistical analysis—multiple regression—was used to predict the extent to which conflict management significantly reduced the four stressors. Managers who engaged in conflict management behaviors experienced significantly lower role

conflict, role ambiguity, work overload, and time pressure than managers who did not use conflict management. In addition, the regular use of conflict management corresponded with significantly lower levels of stress reactions such as sleeping difficulty, tiredness, and irritability.

Managers reported some concerns about using the conflict management process. The study suggested that some individuals were concerned about the risks associated with discussing situations when their bosses were part of the conflict or stress. For example, some managers practiced conflict management with their bosses regarding work overload and found that their bosses were initially unwilling to discuss the stressful situation, but through skillful conflict management in clarifying work expectations, the managers persuaded their bosses to reprioritize their workload. While the risk of meeting resistance from supervisors exists, managers can earn supervisors' respect by speaking up and asking for help in reprioritizing assignments. The latter reaction may depend on the manager's aptitude in using conflict management.

Skills for effective conflict management

The results of this study indicate that conflict management—knowing how to resolve or manage stressful situations—is a valuable resource for combating workplace stressors. Successfully managing stressful work situations means mastering four specific skills:

- Assertive communication;
- Active listening;
- Problem-solving; and
- Negotiation.

Assertive communication is a method of courageously standing up for your rights, needs, or expectations while being attentive to the other person's rights, needs, and expectations. It means taking the responsibility to initiate discussion of stressors

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with key individuals who can help reduce them. It is important that both parties interact in an "I count/you count" manner as opposed to an aggressive "I count/you don't count" manner or a passive "I don't count/you count" transaction. Neither the aggressive nor the passive style results in win-win outcomes. Both parties must take responsibility to interact collaboratively and find mutually satisfactory solutions to conflicts or stressors.

Effective listening is a powerful way of communicating to a speaker that he or she counts. It is also critical for developing a shared understanding of the problems that lie behind the stressors. One of the best ways to listen is to seek to understand the speaker as he or she wants to be understood. Listeners should summarize in their own words what they heard the speakers say. The listener's goal is to attain an accurate understanding of what the speaker said, even if he or she disagrees with what was spoken. In addition, listeners need to ask good questions that encourage speakers to share more relevant information and clarify ambiguous messages.

Problem-solving is essential when dealing with conflicts or clarifying work expectations. A problem can be defined as a gap between actual and desired circumstances. The goal is to reduce the gap by reaching a clear definition of the problem and identifying causes. It is important for individuals not to rush to find solutions before they understand the problem.

Finding mutually satisfactory solutions to a conflict usually requires negotiation. An important aspect of negotiation is the generation of as many options or alternatives as possible. The more options generated, the more likely that parties will find a win-win solution. Effective negotiation also requires both parties to attempt to determine each other's wants and needs rather than negotiating from a fixed position. Developing mutual understanding between parties requires both parties to inquire about each others' wants and needs and provide relevant information. For example, a project manager might say to a project team member, "I need you to attend all our meetings because your input is important in the timing and acceptance of decisions made during the meeting" rather than, "You need to be at the meetings because that is our policy."

Practical steps you can take

Here are some specific steps managers

can take toward using the strategies of conflict management to reduce stressors. First, it is necessary to increase awareness of self and others. One way to do this is to draw a line down the middle of a blank piece of paper making two columns and three rows. Label the left-hand column "Self" and the right-hand column "Other." Label the top row "Perceived Problem," the middle row "Feelings," and the bottom row "Needs/Wants." Now fill in the self and other columns with your perceptions of the situation. Finally, prepare a list of questions for any additional information you may need answered to resolve the conflict in an "I count/you count" manner.

Second, extend an invitation to the person with whom you are experiencing a conflict or stressful problem. It is important to let the person know your full intent for discussing the stressor. For example, managers in the study who effectively used conflict resolution used statements like "Our working relationship is important to me, therefore I would like to talk about..." or "I would like to discuss what I think is a mutual concern and see if we can find a solution that is good for both of us." Note that the person speaks for himself or herself and not for the other person. Speaking for others generally tends to create defensiveness. Select a time that is convenient for the other party and pick a neutral place to hold the discussion. This improves perceptions of mutual respect. It is a good idea to have a flip chart available for parties to write down ideas and to use as a springboard for interactions.

Third, use a four-C structure to guide the discussion. The four C's stand for communicate, clarify, create options, and commit to a win-win solution. The first step is taking responsibility to communicate your awareness of the conflict to the person(s) significantly related to the stressor(s). The objective of the communication should be to develop a solid foundation to further discuss the conflict. This means searching for areas of agreement such as identifying goals that are common to both parties.

The next step is to clarify the problem and individuals' wants and needs. The problem itself is clarified from two perspectives: first, how the system in the organization contributes to the problem and second, ways in which each individual plays a part in the problem. After consensus is reached on the problem, each individual's needs or expectations should

be clarified. It is important to distinguish between demands and needs. This distinction becomes especially difficult when individuals use the power of their position to force others to meet their wishes.

The next step is for parties to mutually create options or alternative solutions—brainstorming a list of solutions to the problem. The best solution is one that will satisfy the wants and needs of both parties.

Finally, both parties should indicate their commitment to the final solution. It is wise for individuals to explore whether anything will prevent them from fulfilling their agreement.

Due to the turbulent changes in most organizations, managers must find ways to respond effectively to stressors they experience. The results of this study suggest that managers who use conflict management have lower stressors and stress reactions. The specific steps detailed above can be used as part of a personalized conflict management strategy to respond effectively to increased demands in the workplace.

For Further Reading

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