Diagnosing Conflict for Managers and Supervisors

As a supervisor or manager at your organization, you play a key role in fostering healthy organizational practices through clear communication and responsible management practices that include providing feedback, offering training and support, and shepherding processes for improvement and accountability. Because of your positional role, it is especially important that you take a moment when conflict or active disagreement emerges to diagnose the nature, sources, and pathways of the conflict. Pausing to diagnose conflict can also help disrupt unhelpful reactive tendencies, prevent short-sighted solutions or ill-informed management strategies, and lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. As a manager or supervisor, you are responsible for responding to conflict in a timely manner so that it does not spread, create or add to harm, or cause other disruptions for your organization. Not all individuals will diagnose the conflict in the same way; however, being able to discuss or share the differences in diagnoses can help increase understanding (if not full agreement) and emerge pathways towards either resolution or responsible management.

To foster trust and transparency, conflict should always be managed with tact, confidentiality, respectful withholding of judgment or premature promises for a resolution, and equitable, consistent communication with the parties involved. If the conflict is in direct violation of human resources protocols or your organization's code of conduct and/or the individuals engaged in the conflict are not responsive to responsible management, you may need to invoke a grievance process, performance improvement plan, or consider termination.

Below is a short description of a diagnostic process with a reflection worksheet at the end.

Developing a Diagnosis

Fully understanding the nature of the conflict as best as you can is essential for determining a path forward. As a manager, your role is to protect staff well-being, safety, and support their needs; assess the root cause of the conflict; evaluate the scope of the organization's responsibility; and develop appropriate steps to manage the conflict.

You should also consider the impact that positional power or identity is having on the way the conflict is being experienced, interpreted, and talked about. This will help you sensitively develop a fuller understanding of the conflict and the organization's role in resolving or responsibly managing the situation.

Determining Resolution or Responsible Management

Developing a diagnosis will indicate if the conflict can be resolved. Resolvable conflicts have their roots in organizational structures, systems, and practices. Resolution might require increased transparency or training around these structures, systems, and practices, or alterations to them. Resolution might require a clear decision from someone with positional power, and/or a process to increase buy in and understanding for the affected individuals or across the whole organization.

As the supervisor or manager, you may be able to fully resolve the conflict if more clarity or training is needed around systems, structures, and practices. For example, you can clarify roles or make adjustments to a staff member's work load if the conflict is rooted in their productivity on a team project. If changes to systems, structures, or practices are required to resolve the conflict, you will need to engage the appropriate decision makers or processes for those changes at your organization. Resolvable conflict can often unearth systematic

barriers or obstacles within your organization; addressing those systemic issues will lead to a more resilient, cohesive organization.

Not all conflicts will be resolve-able and will therefore require careful management for de-escalation and diffusion. However, as a manager and supervisor, you *are* responsible for ensuring that the workplace is a safe, respectful environment by holding individuals accountable to a standard of conduct, providing ongoing feedback about individual contributions to the organization's culture, clarifying grievance processes at your organization, and creating plans to document and track change.

Consider the two scenarios below and determine how you or your organization might resolve or manage these challenges.

Younger program staff have complained to you that the organization was not being responsive to diversity, equity, and inclusion. They specifically requested staff trainings around racism and bias, and do not feel the organization has responsibly taken a public position around race-based incidents in the community. These concerns came to a head during one staff call, when a staff member elevated these concerns in a way that surprised the Executive Director. After the meeting, the Executive Director was troubled, confused at being "pounced on," and asked for your insight in addressing this. The ED made clear to you that the main challenges are funding and that they have a capacity building request out with a funder for DEI trainings, but won't know if those funds will be available for three more months.

The upcoming primary for Governor has been incredibly heated with multiple candidates from the same party campaigning aggressively in the area. The organization has decided not to publicly endorse any candidates. One staff member recently posted in the staff chat about volunteering to canvass for one of the candidates over the weekend. A different staff person came to you to complain, asserting that the candidate the person posted about was a bigot and they no longer felt safe communicating or having to work with that coworker. After investigating the candidate in question, it seems that the local police department had endorsed that candidate, but you aren't able to find anything else that might indicate any cause for concern.

Final Reflections for Tending and Care

We should all expect some conflict any time groups of individuals interact with one another. One of conflict's gifts is that successfully navigating through it can increase your organization's resilience by stress testing your structures, systems, and practices and result in an organization that is more transparent, consistent, and responsive in how it navigates internal challenges.

After you've diagnosed the conflict and taken action towards a path for resolution or responsible management, make sure to take a moment to reflect on *your* management of the situation, as well as your organization's responsiveness or reactive tendencies.

Diagnosing Conflict: A Worksheet for Managers and Supervisors

Who is affected?

Managers and supervisors should include themselves as they reflect on these questions

- Who is involved?
- What is their role in the conflict?
- What organizational roles do they hold?
- How do they identify as individuals?
- What are the conflict styles at play (link to 5 conflict styles document)?

What is the conflict?

What happened?

- You may need to invite the perspectives or input of other people at your organization; do so only if you feel this is necessary due to the scope of the conflict (it is escalating and impacting other parts of the organization)

Is there more to the story?

- If the individuals involved report directly to you, you may be able to determine this relatively quickly on your own, or you may need to check in with other managers/supervisors at your organization to speak with those people

What is the root or core of the conflict? This could include several factors, but consider if it seems to be

- Interpersonal
- A misunderstanding related to poor or problematic communication
- A misunderstanding related to ambiguity around roles, responsibilities, or power (especially decision-making)
- Disagreement related to a collaboration's process or goals
- Disagreement to a change, decision, or implementation of a new practice or policy
- Something else?

Is this conflict related to structures, systems, or practices at your organization? This can be indicated through:

- Ambiguity over roles, responsibilities, or decision making
- Inconsistent implementation of policies, practices, or protocols
- Low or inconsistent communication and transparency throughout the organization

Is this the first or only time this conflict has emerged?

- If it's a recurring conflict: are the same people involved?
- It it's a recurring conflict: is the conflict persistent at your organization despite personnel or staffing changes?

Does this conflict seem resolvable (its roots are within the organization's scope of responsibility)?

Does this conflict seem likely to improve with responsible management (its roots are outside of the scope of the organization's responsibility, but its symptoms can be addressed or mitigated)?

For final reflection:

- What happened after this conflict was brought to my attention?
- Am I satisfied with how I managed it?
- How do impacted individuals feel about the organization's response?
- How does conflict tend to evolve at the organization?
- How does conflict tend to resolve or dissipate at the organization?
- Are these practices healthy and supportive for staff resilience and function?
- How did I resource myself throughout this experience?