

The Role of SOCIAL STYLE Training in Managing Workplace Conflict

Conflict is an inevitable reality of interacting with others. Different perceptions, priorities and personalities cause people to disagree, sometimes with disastrous results. The award-winning “Managers as Negotiators” study revealed that managers spend up to 42% of their work time resolving conflict. But conflict does not always have to be a negative experience, and understanding others’ interpersonal differences can help individuals have more satisfying interactions and help organizations increase productivity and retention.

The TRACOM Group recently surveyed 146 people from organizations across North America to understand the impact of conflict in the workplace, as well as the role behavior plays in managing that conflict. All survey respondents had previously received training in SOCIAL STYLE™, the behavior model developed by the TRACOM Group.

Key Findings

Major Sources of Conflict

- 63 percent of respondents identified lack of information or different understanding of information as a top source of conflict
- 60 percent blamed competing priorities
- 50 percent cited deadlines or limited resources
- 41 percent identified interpersonal behavior/Style differences

Effects of Workplace Conflict

- 67 percent of respondents said team productivity had decreased as a result of conflict
- 54 percent said organizational productivity had decreased
- 41 percent said “My personal productivity has decreased”
- 31 percent said “Someone I know has left a job”
- 67 percent said that regardless of the source of conflict, individuals’ Social Style differences made conflicts worse
- 92 percent said that when in conflict, taking Style differences into account made it easier to address the underlying issues

Since SOCIAL STYLE Training

- 86 percent of respondents stated they were more confident in their ability to handle conflict
- 71 percent said they had used their knowledge of Style to avoid or prevent potential conflict situations
- 47 percent said the number or intensity of conflicts they were involved in had decreased
- 71 percent said they were more likely to quickly recover and move beyond conflicts than they were before training

In response to this survey, the TRACOM Group has created a guide, **Managing Conflict With Style**. The book provides specific advice to help people anticipate and reduce the occurrence of conflict, prevent escalation, repair damage caused by conflict, and more.

The Impact of Conflict

Where does conflict come from? People most often point to competing priorities or limited resources. Yet, interpersonal differences are sighted by 41 percent. The authors of the research review “Managing Conflict in Work Teams”¹ came to an even stronger conclusion: “Current research shows personality and interpersonal conflict to be the second highest overall source of project conflict.”

Survey respondents also agreed that organizational, team and personal productivity suffer in the midst of conflict. In fact, almost a third of respondents (31 percent) know someone who has left a job over workplace conflict, and 14 percent have themselves left a job for that reason. Whatever the cause of the original conflict, 67 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that individuals’ Social Style differences make conflicts worse.

Casey Mulqueen, TRACOM’s director of research, and a PhD in industrial/organizational psychology, says, “People of each Style have preferred ways of acting and interacting. Conflict tends to escalate when people’s preferences clash. What may have been a relatively minor issue can quickly balloon into something larger.”

Managing Conflict With Style

Social Style is the world’s best-known behavior model. Individuals are evaluated according to their preferred behaviors, and are identified as one of four Social Styles. Identifying an individual’s Style helps them understand their verbal and non-verbal communication tendencies and how they are perceived by others. Using this knowledge, people can separate behavior issues from the underlying source of tension and adapt their own behavior to successfully work with others.

Thus, Social Style is a useful tool for conflict prevention and management. 67 percent of survey-takers agreed and 24 percent strongly agreed that taking Style differences into account makes it easier to address the underlying issues of conflict. Employees who have received training in Social Style:

- have used their knowledge of Style to address conflicts at work (74 percent);
- are more confident in their ability to handle conflict. (86 percent);
- have used their knowledge of Style to avoid or prevent potential conflict situations (71 percent);
- have seen a decrease in the number or intensity of conflicts they are involved in (47 percent);
- are more likely to quickly recover and move beyond conflicts than they were before training (71 percent).

¹ http://www.geocities.com/lazaridous/managing_conflict_in_work_teams.htm

The TRACOM Group helps individuals and organizations improve workplace performance by building interpersonal skills, improving teamwork, developing leaders and enhancing communications. TRACOM offers measurement-based learning models, courses, surveys, assessment tools and consulting services, which have been used successfully for nearly 50 years. Much of TRACOM's work is based on the SOCIAL STYLE MODEL,[™] a proven model for effective work and personal relationships. TRACOM is a division of Reed Business Information.



Summary and Implications

While conflicts occur for a variety of external reasons, this survey and other research demonstrate that the majority of conflicts arise from internal sources: Style differences. Conflict hurts productivity at all levels. The “Managing Conflict in Work Teams” article says, “The consequences of poorly handled team conflict are a lowering of team energy, disruption of healthy relationships, and the prevention of job accomplishment.”

The good news is that understanding behavior differences can dramatically improve workplace conflict. “Research indicates that high performing teams are capable of mediating their own conflicts while improving productivity and strengthening relationships,” according to the article. Employees

who apply their Social Style training are confident in their ability to deal with conflict, can avoid or lessen conflict, and are able to move beyond conflict once it has occurred. Being able to adapt one's behavior when dealing with others has proven to be a marker of success.

Another TRACOM study showed that managers with a higher degree of Social Style skills are better at leading teams and coaching others and are more likely to be promoted.² When people use their knowledge of Social Style in the workplace, improved productivity and more satisfying personal interactions result.

² “Documenting the Relationship Between Versatility and Job Performance” by The TRACOM Group

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