

## **Plano's Conflict Management System (Article 2 of 3)**

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### **Embracing Conflict: It's All About Perspective and Skill**

If you believe (as I do) that investing resources into a Conflict Management System (CMS) is a good idea, where will you begin? A suggestion is to follow a Covey principle from the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and “Begin with the end in mind.” Consider the most immediate needs of your organization and develop strategies that will blossom into more global benefits for people and processes. A word of advice is to not lose sight of reality and expect everyone to welcome this idea with open arms. An initiative of this type will challenge mindsets, comfort zones, and lifetimes of being competitive rather than collaborative. Introduction of a new format for addressing conflict will require careful thought and preparation. However, you know your organization and its people better than anyone; so, just take the time to plan what you believe will work.

Employees need to know how and where to ask for help. Communicate the conflict resolution process through policies, newsletters, staff meetings, and websites. You can offer an internal mediator/facilitator or a panel of facilitators to collaborate on each issue. It is important to put the system in place that meets your needs, and be certain that facilitators are adequately trained to deliver results.

Your ultimate goal may include conflict management training for all supervisors/managers, but that will begin with a single training class for a manageable group of people (10-15). This is where you will test your curriculum to be certain it addresses appropriate information. It will also let you know whether the organizational environment is receptive to resolving conflicts with well-considered words rather than attacks. Undoubtedly, some people will be a bit resistant, but you will soon find that many are pleased to have an alternative to the usual feelings of stress and helplessness that accompany unmanaged conflict. Conflict managers quickly discover that their newfound skills work as well in their personal lives as they do in the workplace. Consequently, they continue the course of learning and practicing these skills, because they are recipients of the benefits.

To equip managers with skills to function as competent facilitators, educate them on the following topics:

#### **1. Overview of Interpersonal Conflict & Conflict Resolution**

This class will acquaint managers with the *language* of conflict resolution. They will learn the importance of regulating interactions and discussions to be collaborative rather than competitive. This will change the tone of conversations and make them more productive. In addition, it teaches managers to redirect conversations and keep topics on target without getting lost in emotion.

## **2. Effective Communication and Listening Skills**

This class is necessary to teach managers to listen attentively and hear actual issues amidst multiple ideas. It should include lessons on how to reframe ideas to make topics more approachable. Participants will learn to promote the mutuality of communication so that concepts are actually shared and understood. When managers complete this class, they will know the importance of creating an environment that is conducive to two-way communication.

## **3. Defensible Documentation Techniques**

We cannot prove what we cannot present. In addition to providing a platform from which we can tell our stories, well-written documentation substantiates our perspectives. When parties agree to a resolution, it should be put in writing so that the terms may be referenced and it may be modified, if needed. Few things tell a story better than a concise, yet comprehensive, clearly written document. Documentation is extremely important when the need arises to tell your story to an attorney for any reason. It also assists with promoting accountability on both an individual and an organizational level.

## **4. Relationship Management**

This class will explore human interaction and the results of these encounters. Conflict resolution largely focuses on managing relationships. Oftentimes, discussions that most need to occur are avoided because we do not know how to approach them. The reality is that when we create trust and credibility with others, a safe environment is established which fosters these conversations. Article #1 of this series stressed that the objective of a Conflict Management System is not to prevent conflict, but to manage it. This is accomplished through a thorough exploration of how the quality of relationships is influenced by the way people interact and communicate with one another. Participants will learn to positively impact the work environment by positively growing their relationships with others.

These classes are worth the time and effort to develop and offer, because they will create managers who will:

- Practice effective communication skills daily
- Exhibit confidence to manage difficult conversation/situations
- Model conflict resolution skills for employees
- Understand the benefits of being flexible, rather than rigid, with others
- Avoid tendencies to ridicule and monopolize conversations
- Create a more accountable, results-oriented work environment

As managers are educated and encouraged to practice these skills, employees will realize that unmanaged conflict will not be allowed to continue and negatively impact productivity. Issues will not be allowed to fester; cause employees to feel uncomfortable

or unsafe; or distract employees from their jobs. This will be accomplished through the formula introduced in Article 1 of this series (November, 2007) as indicated below:

<b>Diagnosis</b>	Ability to evaluate	<u>What's</u> going on?
<b>Analysis</b>	Ability to conceptualize	<u>Why</u> is this happening?
<b>Strategy</b>	Ability to plan	<u>How</u> might I respond?

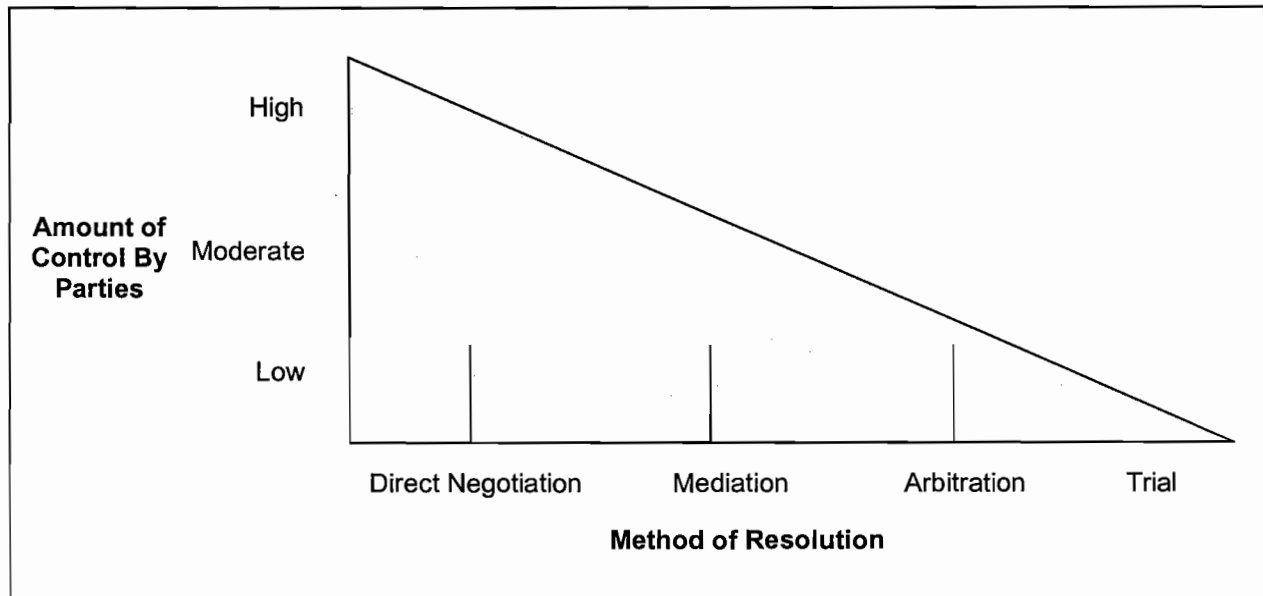
In order to accomplish this, you could either hire staff to intervene and help develop resolution “maps” or you could train existing staff to serve as conflict facilitators. The objective is to educate employees to proactively enlist assistance with conflict before it spirals into more difficult situations that may require the use of external professionals (i.e., attorneys, mediators, arbitrators, etc. not associated with your organization). Typically, when services of external professionals are sought, the conflict has become so entrenched that the issues are personalized. At this point, the stakes are much higher, and the battle will become much more physically, emotionally, and financially exhausting. This is why it is important to take issues seriously when they are brought to your attention. You may think the situation is unimportant and may choose to ignore it or decide it is unworthy of further discussion. However, when this same issue is presented to you by an attorney or a branch of the government that investigates complaints of discrimination, harassment, etc., you will no longer have the ability to determine your options. These are the situations you want to avoid.

Although you want to maintain as much control over issues as possible, there are times when it is advisable to work with an external professional to resolve issues. This happens when:

- The nature of the conflict stems from alleged violation(s) of statutory rights (i.e., Title VII Civil Rights Issues).
- The employee’s position in the organization makes the situation more volatile.
- The level of expertise/specialization needed is not found within your organization.

Remember that you are in the most favorable position when you are directly involved in determining the resolution. As you relinquish the power to decide outcomes, there is an increasing possibility that you may be less pleased with the final resolution. So, it is useful to hone what you learn about communication and effective listening and avoid handing your conflict off for someone else to resolve.

There exists an inverse relationship between the power of the third-party neutral and of the parties’ control over the final settlement of their dispute. As the control of the neutral *increases*, the parties’ control in the settlement of their dispute *decreases*.



Having internal resources available to resolve conflicts as early as possible (and teach relevant skills during the resolution process) is empowering and fiscally responsible. Oftentimes, employees hire attorneys or seek the help of human rights organizations because they feel they have no other choice. As society becomes more rights-based and diverse, people will likely experience more of a need to “fight” for what they perceive to be their entitlement(s). With this in mind, organizations must be prepared to face these attitudes. It is in these situations that a strong defense makes a good offense, or vice versa. This internal process has absolutely made a difference in Plano, and this is what we continue to see:

- Fewer complaints directed to the City Manager
- Partnerships between HR and departments to identify strategies for early intervention
- Improved communication within and between departments
- Early recognition of potential relationship problems
- Improved processes and documentation to promote accountability
- Creation of a solution-focused work environment

Internal facilitators are a tremendous resource to help employees manage their emotions and practice effective communication. They can intervene; help calm the parties down; help identify the issues; and facilitate discussion of options to resolve the conflict. It is the facilitator’s job to build trust among him/her and the parties in conflict and to reframe the conversation so that the issues become the problem – not the people. Employees who have the conflict with one another become part of the solution-oriented process; so, this is not a situation where resolution occurs without their input. It is this process that teaches them to manage their emotions and be committed to the outcome. Participants learn to repeat this process on their own and even model it for others. This is how more global

organizational benefits are realized. Through helping its employees, the organization helps itself in multiple ways.

The City of Plano, Texas is committed to this system of addressing conflict, because it has seen growing benefits over the past seven (7) years. What began as a conflict management class for a few managers has become an organizational commitment to expedient and effective management and resolution of conflict. A group of eleven (11) facilitators were selected from among approximately 200 certified facilitators to carry out the purpose of the Conflict Management System which is to provide options to employees to resolve work-related conflicts with the assistance of a qualified, neutral, internal third party. Confidentiality and respect for the employee is honored throughout this process. It is also understood that managerial discretion should not be compromised by the CMS; so, employees are made aware of matters that are ineligible for review through this system. These are issues such as discipline, job assignment, promotions/demotions, performance evaluation ratings, etc. All employees are encouraged to informally discuss and resolve conflicts directly with the employee(s) with whom they have a disagreement. However, the CMS is an excellent alternative when these attempts are unproductive.

Plano has seen vast improvement in early detection and more expedient, effective resolution of conflict. Employees understand that all parties involved in the conflict will be part of the resolution. Managers have the tools and the language to reposition/reframe situations with potential to quickly spiral out of control. This prevents a loss of productivity by both the manager and the employee, which could result from circular discussions of recurring topics.

What has the introduction of a Conflict Management System in Plano meant to its employees?

- Having the ability to directly address difficult situations rather than avoiding them
- Knowing how to manage a conversation so that emotions can be shown but not used as weapons
- Being able to move situations toward results rather than getting stuck in a “war of words”
- Giving managers the tools they need to maintain control of employee issues, which prevents them from spending untold hours refereeing circular discussions
- Promoting a work environment that is not consumed by discord

How did Plano accomplish this? They simply learned the psychology of conflict; learned the language of conflict; and continue to practice the formulas for resolving conflict.

### **About the Authors**

*Dr. Anthony Picchioni* is Director of the Dispute Resolution Program at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. He has utilized his extensive knowledge and experience in negotiation, organizational behavior, conflict management, change

management and dispute resolution to educate corporate executives and business people across the United States and abroad.

With more than twenty years experience as a mediator, Dr. Picchioni, has assisted in resolving numerous types of disputes, including those involving employment, commercial contracts, interdepartmental conflicts and family matters. Dr. Picchioni received his Ph. D. from the University of North Texas in Counseling. He has also done extensive post-graduate studies in Dispute Resolution at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, Pepperdine Law School and CDR Associates, Boulder, Colorado.

**LaShon Ross** is a native of Texarkana, AR-TX where she was born and lived before moving to Plano, Texas in 2001. She received her Bachelor's Degree from East Texas State University – Texarkana (now Texas A & M) and was Director of HR for the City of Texarkana, Texas for almost thirteen years before assuming the same position of Director of Human Resources with the City of Plano in March of 2001.

LaShon is a 2001 graduate of Leadership Plano; holds a Certificate in Mediation Studies; and is a Certified Professional through the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR). She has completed extensive work with the City of Plano in the areas of succession planning, leadership development, and conflict resolution. She also maintains civic involvement through membership on several Boards and participates annually in local high school and college career day activities/programs.