Chapter 76

The Impact of Culture on Workplace Conflict in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

There are many subtleties within a culture that affect decision-making. Lack of understanding of these nuances enhances the mystique of cross-cultural business. Global managers need to better understand trans-cultural decision-making to maximize the benefits of alliances and business relationships abroad. One of these subtleties, often discussed in relation to business in the Orient, is conflict management. The notion of "face" and the importance of individual honor pervade cultural briefing materials on countries such as Japan. It is a defining difference in human relationship management between East and West. Yet when dealing with employees in nations speaking the same language, as a U.S. manager to a Caribbean manager, one often fails to account for equally significant differences in managing conflict. This chapter discusses the impact of culture-specific attitudes concerning workplace conflict on business performance in the Caribbean, using examples specifically from Grenada.

INTRODUCTION

Managing workplace conflict is more than just a path to a harmonious work environment. Unmanaged conflict weakens the woven fabric of corporate culture and the ability of senior management to achieve its goals. Various departments and their employees are required to work in collaboration toward over-arching corporate objectives, but will

fail to do so when inter-personal conflict between employees cripples communication and cooperation. The culturally accepted modes of dealing with conflict cannot be easily over-ridden by executive dictates. Neither can one assume that individuals will put personal grievances aside for the good of the larger organization. Although collectivist cultures will expect exactly that of their members, the suppression of overt hostility to present a face of cooperation does not lead to harmony and efficiency in a Caribbean workplace.

Managers need to find mechanisms to expose the dynamics of inter-personal conflict in the firm and to bridge any gaps between the norms of the local culture and the desired corporate culture before performance goals are compromised.

The cultures of the Caribbean islands are colored by their colonial history. Autocratic management is common, and to some degree expected. Although overt challenges to authority are rare, disagreement and disobedience may be expressed via passive resistance and subterfuge. While the community spirit is a force to be tapped for great energy, this same community can become an isolating force that shuts out those who are not in favor. It can cause conflict to spread quickly. Leaders can use an open door policy and one on one chats to expose and defuse unresolved or unvoiced conflict. Managers wishing to succeed in the Caribbean would do well to develop clear goals and structured roles for employees within their firms, utilizing executive power to manage expectations, explain strategies, and reward goal achievement.

This chapter will briefly discuss the role of conflict management in organizational performance and review the types of conflict management styles normally found in the workplace. This will be applied to the Caribbean context - looking at the history of the islands as it affects conflict response mechanisms in the workplace. Examples are provided to illustrate behavior and suggestions are given to assist managers in mediating conflict situations.

WORKPLACE CONFLICT AS AN ASPECT OF BUSINESS PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Today's organizations are under tremendous pressure to perform, facing challenges from all directions in a world of information overload, global competition, unavoidable inter-dependence, and frenetic pace. Globalization creates many new business partners. Mergers are made which create multi-cultural work families. Manufacturing moves into ever more distant and low cost territories, while jaded, globe-trotting tourists explore ever more remote recreational sites. It soon becomes apparent that, in order to succeed, understanding other cultures is an imperative. Aligning the efforts of individual workers toward common goals and objectives is one of management's key tasks. In an environment where speed to market can mean the difference between profit and loss, ensuring effective collaboration between work groups becomes a core competency for many firms. The responsibilities of management include providing a workplace in which people are not distracted from key tasks by co-worker hostility, a manager's refusal to resolve problems, or executive feuds.

Workplace conflict usually involves interaction and inter-dependence. Conflict can be defined as a difference in ideologies, approaches, or goals. Conflict begins when one party perceives "that the other has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that he or she cares about" (Thomas, 1992, p. 653) In addition to those mentioned previously, other negative effects of hostility in the workplace include reduced rationality and a reduction in information sharing – between individuals or between groups. In today's knowledge-based economy, information sharing is vital to successful performance (Adewole, 2005; Ratten & Suseno, 2006). The information shared may include new sources of data, new contacts, new ideas, or information that allows the firm to perceive new market opportunities. Information sharing builds the social capital that bonds members of a group (Granovetter, 2005), whether in inter-organizational alliances or cross-functional team collaboration. The open and unfettered transmission of knowledge between individuals and groups depends on trust and goodwill (Sporleder & Moss, 2002). When interpersonal conflicts limit information transfer, this lack of knowledge reduces the quality of decision-making.

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