Managing conflict in the workplace

In my current job role I have experienced a conflict situation first hand. The company went through a redundancy process due to a reduction in demand for our products because of the recession. Emergence Emergence is when the conditions for conflict arise and a potential conflict becomes one. In Robbins' organizational context, this is divided into two sequential stages. It starts with " potential opposition or incompatibility," what Brahm and Kriesberg call " latent conflict," when the opportunity for conflict is ripe, due to schisms in communication, action or personal issues.

If one party is negatively affected by these conditions enough to respond to them, the conflict actualises into what Robbins calls the " cognition and personalisation" stage. This initially started when there was talk within the teams on the shop floor that the company was not receiving enough orders. Nothing specifically had happened but the team was aware of some tensions and that something was " not right". At this point in time nothing was done differently and all staff continued within their day to day work with a reduced work load.

Over the following weeks several team briefing sessions were held with the team where management informed the team that they would be looking at putting the workforce on a four day working week due to the reduction in orders received by the company. Staff was also informed that they would only be paid for the four days that they were working. The management team sold this to the staff as a temporary measure and staff were under the impression that this would be for 2-3 weeks at the most.

Escalation In this stage, the conflict escalates as both parties perceive the other's intentions, either correctly or, as is often the case, erroneously. This

is the stage where the parties involved begin exhibiting behaviours in direct opposition to the opponent's perceived intentions, such as competitive statements and avoidance tactics. At this point, a conflict can become " institutionalized" if the parties continue to view each other as adversaries and perpetuate their perceptions of the other person's identity based on that person's position in the conflict.

Over the following weeks it became apparent that the effects of the reduction of work did not involve the whole factory. The staff that were based in the offices continued to work a five day week and thus getting paid a full wage. This caused a feeling of tension to mistrust between the two groups of staff. This affected me directly and personally made me less cooperative with the management and administrative teams. At that point I was on paternity leave as both my partner and I had just had our baby and the additional pressure of losing money was a major concern to me.

This was never discussed with the factory staff or explained that there was a need for the office staff to continue to work for the five days. The management team held a meeting and informed the whole factory that they would be looking at reducing the workforce through a redundancy process as the demand for our products was not improving and that the company could not continue to pay for the number of staff employed. Crisis At a certain point in a conflict, the adversaries become so polarised in their opposition that neither party wants to concede even though neither is poised to win the conflict.

This crisis or emergency stage may be reached after strategies for domination have failed, support has fled, resources have dissolved or the

cost of perpetuating the conflict has become too great. Often this is when a stalemate occurs. The redundancy process was conducted using a skills matrix. This matrix was used to asses the skills of the whole workforce giving each member of staff a score on their ability to use the different pieces of machinery in their areas of work. As the shift upervisor I was informed that I was on the selection panel.

This caused conflict within the various teams as each member of staff was having their skills and abilities compared with the skills and abilities of their colleagues. Following this assessment each person was being allocated a score with the outcome of possibly losing their jobs. Many of the staff have a number of years experience and this caused conflict between the older and younger staff as the older staff felt that due to their long service and experience they would be " Safe".

This conflict accelerated in to arguments in the canteen between colleagues and grown men ignoring each other and refusing to help each other throughout their working day. The scores obtained from the skills matrix were then displayed on the noticed board so that all staff could see each others scores. This in itself fuelled the conflict as staff began to compare their scores with one another and disagree with scoring for their colleagues. Negotiation

Once both parties in a conflict recognise that they have reached a stalemate, their tenacity for their position loosens, their emotional intensity and attachments soften and their willingness grows to hear the other party out. At this point, the situation reaches the " de-escalation" stage and the possibility for some sort of settlement emerges. Strategies such as

compromise and bargaining take place in this stage. A series of meetings were then held with staff individually to discuss their scoring and future with the company.

At this meeting all Staff were offered the option of taking voluntary redundancy. Staff with a lower scoring were informed of their redundancy and given a two weeks notice period. Resolution What Robbins refers to as the " outcomes" stage, Brahm and Kriesberg divide into two stages: " Settlement/Resolution" and " Post-Conflict Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. " Whatever name you give it, this fifth and final stage is when the conflict is in some way resolved, peaceably if possible. Robbins notes that outcomes may be either functional or dysfunctional.