

## Job wise

**Topic:** Encouraging conflict at the workplace

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The word 'conflict' may bring to mind images of aggression and disagreeability but in the workplace scenario it can be of great use as a little bit of argument can dispel indolence and stagnancy.

"The word conflict has a negative connotation attached to it and most people automatically steer clear of creating situations which could lead to conflict. This is, however, not necessarily true. Conflict especially in business discussions is an indication of involvement and interaction, both of which lead to group cohesion and productivity," says Jagadeesh K.S, Global Head of Human Resources, Eka Software Solutions. Omnitech has a special Conflict Resolution Team. Nikul Shah, Senior VP, Commercial and HR, Omnitech InfoSolutions Ltd. tells us more, "It is basically a forum consisting of sales, delivery and commercial representatives incorporated with an intention to resolve all customer related issues jointly with minimal escalations to top management. This team is empowered to take business oriented decisions in favour of the customer as well as Omnitech."

The advantages of conflict are many, but they are manifested only if conflict is controlled and restricted to an optimum level. "Conflict is often imperative as it helps to raise and address problems, energises work if it is on appropriate/required issues, motivates employees to participate, helps people learn how to recognise and benefit from their differences and improves overall efficiency-improves processes and systems. It is when conflict is poorly managed that it is a problem. Conflict is a problem when it hampers productivity, lowers morale, causes more and continued conflicts and causes inappropriate behaviour," says Shah. "Conflict which is purely related to the topic in hand is good; however conflict which is a result of personality clashes is not really healthy or one which is not objective and not in consideration of the facts," opines K. S.

Elaborating further on the two extremes of high and low conflict, K.S. says, "Low conflict indicates minimal interaction which in turn means that the employee's stand is neutral – not really a good place to be in as this indicates a basic lack of interest in the overall decision making process. High conflict, on the other hand, is an extreme which can create chaos, undermine individuals and sometimes strain lines of authority. High conflict also indicates a lack of clarity and this is a situation which should be avoided. Thus, while it is clear that too less or too much conflict can have its complications, there is definitely no doubt that a certain level of conflict is required for the overall health of the decision making process."

It takes some creativity to use conflict positively. "An open work culture where hierarchy is not the trigger for decision making and enforcing, becomes a conducive set up for healthy conflict as in such an atmosphere, employees open up and put forth their ideas which can bring creativity to the discussion and throw up some surprising finds which might have otherwise been missed," says K. S.

Shah adds, "The right intensity of conflict can help in making underlying issues more explicit and motivates towards resolution of the same. It enhances the employees' understanding of

the actual (real) needs and goals and thereby stimulates dialogue leading to a creative/innovative resolution. Since an issue is not getting resolved through conventional means, the need for alternative way of doing things has to be explored.”

While it can be a challenge for HR to deal with heated situations, it is definitely worth the effort. “We have the concerned individuals/teams sit across the table and ensure both sides get an equal opportunity to voice out their apprehensions about the given situation. We try and give an organisational perspective to the problem at hand so that it becomes a collective responsibility of all the parties involved to resolve the issue amicably and the solution is in the best interest of Omnitech and not skewed towards the benefit of any particular individual/team,” says Shah. K. S. seconds this, “As mature adults, it depends on individuals to reconcile conflicts and step back before it reaches a state of unmanageability. However, in a situation in which it does become ugly, HR can intervene by listening to both or all sides of the participants in an objective manner, without taking sides and then make a decision based on its own judgment. This decision should undoubtedly be one which is aligned to the overall health of the organisation. HR also needs to involve managers and more knowledgeable persons to help arrive at an objective viewpoint. HR can facilitate process, but in many cases cannot take the decision.”

Thus, it is up to employees as well as HR to make the best use of conflict without letting it escalate to an unmanageable level.