HEALTHY RESPONSES TO WORKPLACE CONFLICT

As a manager you can facilitate and support a culture of a healthy response to workplace conflict by the following actions:

- **Model and promote desired workplace behaviours**

  By modelling, demonstrating and showing commitment to desired behaviours around communication and conflict management you will not only present a persuasive model to your staff but also encourage a culture of shared conflict responsibility (e.g. values and behaviours articulated and reflected in position descriptions and performance plans).

- **Listen Actively**

  Good communication is an essential ingredient to leading and building a better understanding with your staff, and most importantly it establishes trust. The most critical communication skill is the capacity to listen. The willingness to listen and understand issues and concerns raised by staff (while not necessarily agreeing with their views or positions) can lead to increased insight, changed outlooks and the generation of solutions to problems.

- **Develop strong people management skills**

  In addition to communication skills, people management skills such as motivating staff, sharing information, providing constructive feedback, coaching, and setting clear expectations around roles and responsibilities play a major role in preventing unhealthy conflict.

- **Establish expectations**

  It is important to provide clear guidelines to staff about how conflict is to be managed in the workplace. Staff will have greater commitment to healthy conflict management if you set time for group discussion on the need for conflict guidelines and the positive benefits of well managed conflict.

- **Discuss training needs**

  In discussions with individual staff and your team you can encourage reflection on strengths and difficulties experienced when working in the team. In private performance feedback sessions you can encourage identification of relevant training courses for individuals. In team discussions you may also identify training or team-building activities that would have benefits for the whole team.

- **Refer to support services for additional assistance when necessary**

  There may be occasions when due to the nature or complexity of conflict more specialised support or intervention will be required. It is most important that you recognise the need for additional assistance (e.g. Manager Assist, Employee Relations advice) for advice and guidance on services and
supports that are available. It is also important to seek feedback from staff involved to evaluate whether your suggested intervention has been successful.

GETTING PEOPLE TALKING

The simple act of bringing people together to talk makes a big difference in the course of conflict. It is encouraged for people to meet, with positive intentions, and talk with each other to resolve differences. The manager has a role in encouraging this, and can facilitate positive outcomes by providing staff with guidance on how to approach such difficult conversations.

When emotions are heightened people tend not to think as clearly as they normally would, and they can be defensive or fearful in approaching people they are in conflict with. It is useful to establish some simple ground rules for meeting together to work through differences. When all parties involved in conflict understand and commit to ground rules it provides a base of safety and increased clarity of purpose which can help people stay on track and keep their emotions in check.

Below are some basic ground rules for effectively communicating when in conflict. As a team building exercise you could encourage your staff to discuss these ground rules and to think of others that can be of use to them. It can be very powerful for a team to work together to develop and agree on a set of ground rules. It establishes a mutually understood framework and encourages shared responsibility for working through differences.

Some basic ground rules for effective communication when resolving differences are:

- listen without interrupting
- approach concerns as "us against the problem" not as "me against you"
- present concerns in a factual manner, by stating what has happened, how you feel about the situation and what you would like to happen in the future
- separate the people from the problem
- show a genuine desire to understand the other person's point of view
- acknowledge the other person's views and opinions
- seek to agree on a desired end outcome and then explore alternative options to achieve this
- if emotions flare up agree to reschedule another time to talk
- if you get stuck at a point and cannot move on agree to seek assistance to resolve your concerns
WHEN TRYING TO RESOLVE CONFLICT MATTERS ASK YOURSELF:

- Do I listen carefully without interrupting?
- Do I show concern and encourage the parties to resolve the conflict?
- Do I express empathy?
- Do I ask open-ended questions
- Have I acknowledged and validated each person's position/feelings?
- Have I allowed sufficient time for each person to have their say?
- Do I make sure I have heard the entire message before reacting?
- Have I summarised each party's position?
- Am I displaying impatience or defensiveness?
- Have I dismissed the importance of the issue?
- Am I judging the parties involved?
- Do I deny the feelings of those involved in the conflict?
- Do I argue or disagree with the feelings expressed by the parties involved?
- Have I tried to solve the problem too quickly?
- Have I assumed responsibility for fixing the problem rather than empowering those involved to generate their own solutions?
- Have I approached the concerns objectively by looking at the problem not the person?
- If the conversation gets heated, do I reschedule another time to talk?
- Have I sought advice and assistance in dealing with the conflict?

“Do I show a genuine desire to understand the other person’s point of view?”

STEPS FOR FACILITATING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

There will be occasions when staff are unwilling to meet alone with each other to talk through their differences, or their past attempts have failed. You may then need to directly intervene to assist and facilitate them in this process. There will be other occasions where you have observed early warning signs of unhealthy conflict and need to approach the staff involved to find out what is happening and offer support.

The following model outlines steps you can take to intervene and facilitate conflict resolution between staff, as well as when you are directly involved in conflict.

1. Identify the issues

   - approach the parties individually in a confidential and respectful manner
   - raise your concerns (“I have noticed....” “I feel....” “There appears to be....”)
   - obtain an understanding of the nature of the issues and decide if conflict resolution is appropriate
   - take ownership and responsibility for addressing the issues
   - arrange a mutually agreeable time and location for discussion
explain the process for conflict resolution - confidentiality, respectful behaviour, equal time for speaking and listening, goals of discussion
allow time for the parties to briefly explain their issues and concerns without interruption

2. Explore the issues
summarise and confirm each party’s presenting issues after they have spoken (e.g. "You have said......Is this correct?")
identify common issues and seek agreement on their importance (no more than 3 to 4 issues are recommended)
facilitate open discussion on each key issue independently (e.g. "Can you elaborate on ...?" or "What is your perception of ...?")

3. Generate solutions and options
focus on generating options and developing solutions (e.g. "What are some steps that can be taken to resolve this for you?")
encourage ownership and joint commitment to a mutually agreeable way forward (e.g. "How do you feel about ... as a way forward?", "What is the absolute minimum change each of you require of the other?")

4. Make agreements
establish a specific agreement (who, what, when, where, how)
set a date to review progress of the agreement (e.g. "Let’s meet again on [date] to review progress on this issue")

WHEN CONFLICT INVOLVES YOU

Important things to consider when you are one of the parties in conflict are:

- take ownership and responsibility for your part in the conflict
- identify your emotional triggers and make a conscious decision to keep your emotions in check
- express your interests and concerns assertively
- listen to the other’s position without interrupting
- generate solutions openly and inclusively
- make a time to check how things are going in the near future
- seek further assistance and advice to better support your efforts
- look after yourself