

Paula's Dilemma

Conflict Management Recommendations

This article features a case study to demonstrate the efficacy of EAP conflict-focused services for both employees and employers. Some of the various types of conflict-focused services are also explored.

Paula is the manager of a project team that includes two direct supervisors and the front-line employees they both supervise. Paula's manager, Sue, the agency director, recently called a meeting with Paula to express concern about complaints submitted by front-line staff. The complaints stated that staff received "hostile" and "contradictory" supervision from their direct supervisors.

A separate complaint stated a front-line employee witnessed "tense conversations" between Paula and one of the direct supervisors. Paula was known for "marching down the halls" and "slamming her door" when upset with the direct supervisors.

In her meeting with Sue, Paula said, "*Sometimes I lose my cool but overall everyone seems to like me.*" Exasperated, Paula added, "*I need my direct supervisors to lead in a way that gets results from their team; our productivity is dipping and this is keeping me up at night.*"

Sue and Paula scheduled a consultation with their EAP provider to discuss strategies to assist the team. Ultimately, they decided to implement coaching for Paula and the direct supervisors, mediation for the direct supervisors, and facilitation of team dialogue with the direct-line staff, supervisors, and Paula.

Coaching

In the case of Paula and her team, a program like the Colorado State Employee Assistance Program (CSEAP) may start by offering professional coaching services. Using a 360-feedback instrument, like the Goleman and Boyatzis Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI), could assist Paula in better understanding how she is perceived by others in the workplace.

Paula's 360 results may show discrepancies between her self-ratings and ratings by others. This variance is used by the coach to encourage employee goal-setting in Goleman's and Boyatzis' four EI competency quadrants:

- Self-awareness;
- Self-management;
- Social awareness; and
- Relationship management.

In Paula's situation, increased self-awareness may assist her in understanding how 'losing her cool' could lower both team morale and performance.

If used with direct supervisors, the ESCI results and accompanying coaching sessions could prove useful in boosting effective leadership of the front-line employees. The supervisors cited by employees for "hostile and contradictory supervision," for example, would likely receive low conflict management ratings.

Coaching and discussion of ESCI results could elicit supervisor adjustments in communication including "openly talking" or "bringing [conflict] into the open". ESCI results can also be mapped in a report to demonstrate where leaders, in aggregate, are thriving *and* falling short in their emotional leadership of the team. (**Editor's note:** See sidebar on page 2 for more on the ESCI.)

General professional coaching on soft skills like managing emotions, managing conflict, and interpersonal skills for the workplace are also offered by CSEAP to both referred and voluntary coaches.

In a 2016 study, professional coaching was found to create "a high degree of satisfaction and was superior in helping participants attain their goals" in comparison to professional group training on a performance-impacting issue.

In the case of Paula’s team, coaching on tweaking default approach to conflict may elicit more effective management behaviors from direct supervisors. More specifically, if one or both supervisors identify that they are conflict avoidant or “accommodating,” personalized coaching sessions can assist them in drawing relevant connections between their team’s lagging productivity and their own conflict-averse supervisory style(s).

Mediation & Work Group Facilitation

Further opportunities for EAP conflict intervention include addressing workplace disputes between employee dyads and among the team. As indicated in the case study complaints citing that direct supervisors provide “contradictory guidance,” we might infer that these leaders disagree on how to lead their cross-functional team. As mediation has been shown to be an effective tool in addressing conflicts in the workplace, mediation between the direct supervisors could be an appropriate venue to streamline supervisory practices.

From our internal findings, the mediation process serves to de-escalate conflict by offering a neutral setting for employees to present their differing views and also gain an understanding of their colleague’s perspective. For Paula’s dueling supervisors, improved mutual understanding gained through mediation could assist them in presenting as a unified leadership team to their employees.

According to Schwartz (2002), workplace facilitation seeks to increase “the effectiveness of the group’s process and structure” including “how they handle conflict” (p. 5). Facilitation provided to Paula’s team could assist with their ‘dipping productivity’ by creating a safe structure to discuss team conflict.

For Paula’s team, CSEAP would consult with Paula, her agency director Sue, and the direct supervisors. In addition, feedback – via anonymous survey responses from front-line staff, can help uncover maladaptive team behaviors that impact the bottom line. The neutral facilitator then

More on the Emotional and Social Competency Inventory

The Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI) is a 360-degree survey designed to assess 12 competencies that differentiate outstanding from average performers. The ESCI measures the demonstration of individuals’ behaviors, through their perceptions and those of their raters, making it distinct from measures of EI that assess ability or personality preferences.

The 12 competencies cover four distinct areas of ability (listed in the main article):

Self-awareness – Recognizing and understanding our own emotions, captured in the competency of emotional self-awareness

Self-management – Effectively managing our own emotions; emotional self-control; achievement orientation; positive outlook; and adaptability

Social awareness—Recognizing and understanding the emotions of others; empathy; organizational awareness.

Relationship management – Applying our emotional understanding in our dealings with others: 1) Influence; 2) Coach and mentor; 3) Conflict management; 4) Inspirational leadership; and 5) Teamwork. ■

Source: Emotional and social competency inventory (ESCI): A user guide for accredited practitioners (http://www.eiconsortium.org/pdf/ESCI_user_guide.pdf)

meets with the team to encourage dialogue by first highlighting their aggregate feedback.

How this Differs from the 360-Degree Approach

While a *byproduct* of work group facilitation may include individual improvements in conflict communication, this process focuses more on bolstering effective team dynamics to support overall improvements to productivity. This CSEAP team service incorporates *team member* feedback (vs. individual 360 feedback) in order to reduce maladaptive team behaviors and increase civility in their work-related communication – especially as it pertains to conflict or difficult dialogue.

Through multiple facilitated discussions, teams discover workplace-culture concerns, and structural or organizational issues potentially contributing to team conflict. These discoveries lead to *increased* understanding of workplace conflicts or tensions and the related impact on morale or productivity.

Teams then identify goals focused on improved workplace interactions, and strategies for increased team communication or soft skills improvement – *all of which could be implemented through the comprehensive EAP offering of coaching, training, and facilitation services.*

Coaching vs. Counseling

There needs to be a clear understanding of the differences between coaching and counseling. While it may be appropriate for a licensed mental health provider to use coaching strategies with both trainees and counseling clients, coaches without mental health licensure must understand their limitations should mental-health related concerns enter a coaching conversation. CSEAP licensed providers wear both coaching and counseling “hats.”

Moreover, the EAP practitioner must be astute in determining the appropriateness of coaching versus counseling, or use of both services. In the case of CSEAP, coaching typically focuses on setting and achieving goals for improvement in

professional life while counseling is focused on mental health or personal concerns.

When coaching sessions become solely focused on personal or health-related matters, CSEAP pauses on professional coaching and focuses on counseling support or referring the trainee to an additional provider for further counseling sessions.

Summary

Employee assistance professionals are tasked with developing “a unique approach to addressing work-organization productivity issues” (Employee Assistance Professionals Association [EAPA], 2010, p. 6) and addressing the job performance concerns of the “employee client” (EAPA, 2010, p. 6).

As guided by these core competencies, an EAP such as the Colorado State Employee Assistance Program (CSEAP) is often well versed to offer various services to assist employers and employees in mitigating the negative impact of workplace conflict.

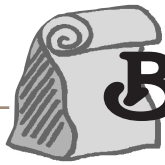
This process often begins with a micro-focus on conflict management skills for individuals, and then expands to view *team* strategies for processing conflict. As a result, EAP conflict-focused services can be very effective for both employees and employers. ■

Sources: Janeen Haller-Abernethy, LCSW, Program Manager for CSEAP, is trained in mediation and holds certifications in Intrinsic Coaching (™) and Emotional Intelligence Coaching. She serves as the primary trainer and facilitator for CSEAP. To contact her or for a list of references used in this article, Janeen may be reached at janeen.hallerabernethy@state.co.us.

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Editor’s note: For more on this topic, see this month’s cover story in Employee Assistance Report.



Conflict Resolution Strategies

❖ *The problem – one person versus the team:* This is usually a situation in which one person “loses control” when stressed. Over time, co-workers avoid giving feedback, fearing an angry reaction.

➤ *The resolution – involve the manager:* The best results occur when the manager participates in problem solving. The manager offers the missing feedback, lets the person know that he/she is having a negative effect on the team, and outlines a plan to improve performance. In this case, the plan includes seminars and visits for personalized education and coaching. Follow up with the manager is key, as is encouraging people to come back for additional coaching if needed.

❖ *The problem – two individuals who can't get along:* Misunderstandings occur, negative assumptions are formed, and both people conclude that the other person is “not a team player.” They

spend time talking to other co-workers about how difficult it is to work with him/her, avoid each other, and the conflict creates a negative environment for everyone.

➤ *The resolution – solicit the help of a facilitator:* When EA professionals are asked to facilitate these matters; it is usually only after higher levels in the organization and/or HR have been involved. Record what the team sees as the positives and negatives of the current situation. Then, outline a “desired state” for the team, listing positive behaviors and the resulting positive environment. The final step is for the team to create guidelines that will improve the working relationship. Instruction on how to listen or give feedback may be necessary. Follow up is a shared responsibility among the team, the team leader, and the manager of the department. ■

Source: Joan Murray, MBA and development specialist.

Important Traits for Resolving Conflicts

The following are among the important traits of managers and employees who understand how to resolve conflicts effectively:

1. They understand the individual's needs. Does the person need to vent? Brainstorm solutions? Effective conflict resolvers know what both parties want, and if they don't, they find out.

2. They are collaborative listeners. Listening is crucial, but effective conflict resolvers take it a

step further and support the other person. As with point #1, the individual needs to feel heard.

3. They are more interested in a good solution, rather than a hasty one. Effective conflict resolvers recognize that while it's important to not drag one's feet, neither do you want to be so anxious for a resolution that you'll settle for anything. Do that and you'll simply revisit the issue later. ■

Source: Dina Beach Lynch, former ombudsman for Fleet Bank.