Resolving Conflict

To manage conflict effectively you must be a skilled communicator. That includes creating an open communication environment in your unit by encouraging employees to talk about work issues. Listening to employee concerns will foster an open environment. Make sure you really understand what employees are saying by asking questions and focusing on their perception of the problem.

Here are some tips you can use when faced with employees who can't resolve their own conflicts.

- **Acknowledge that a difficult situation exists.** Honesty and clear communication play an important role in the resolution process. Acquaint yourself with what's happening and be open about the problem.
- **Let individuals express their feelings.** Some feelings of anger and/or hurt usually accompany conflict situations. Before any kind of problem-solving can take place, these emotions should be expressed and acknowledged.
- **Define the problem. What is the stated problem?** What is the negative impact on the work or relationships? Are differing personality styles a part of the problem? Meet with employees separately at first and question them about the situation.
- **Determine underlying need.** The goal of conflict resolution is not to decide which person is right or wrong; the goal is to reach a solution. Looking first for interests, rather than solutions, is a powerful tool for generating win/win options. To discover interests, you must try to find out why people want the solutions they initially proposed. Once you understand the advantages their solutions have for them, you have discovered their interests.
- **Find common areas of agreement.**
  - Agree on the problem
  - Agree on the procedure to follow
  - Agree on worst fears
  - Agree on some small change to give an experience of success
- **Find solutions to satisfy interests.**
  - Problem-solve by generating multiple alternatives Determine which actions will be taken
  - Make sure involved parties buy into actions. {Total silence may be a sign of passive resistance.) Be sure you get real agreement from everyone.
- **Determine follow-up you will take to monitor actions.** You may want to schedule a follow-up meeting in about two weeks to determine how the parties are doing.
- **Determine what you'll do if the conflict goes unresolved.** If the conflict is causing a disruption in the department and it remains unresolved, you may need to explore other avenues. An outside facilitator may be able to offer other insights on solving the problem. In some cases, the conflict becomes a performance issue, and may become

a topic for coaching sessions, performance appraisals, or disciplinary action.

Dealing with Anger

When you meet with someone who is angry, you can use the tools of effective listening to help defuse this anger. When anger is directed at you, it is much more difficult to respond, because your own emotions are involved.

To effectively defuse anger, keep in mind the needs of the angry speaker:

- To vent. An angry person needs to let off steam and release the anger that may have been brewing for a long time.
- To get the listener's attention. An angry person wants to know that you are paying attention - use your body language to demonstrate that you are listening.
- To be heard. An angry person wants someone to listen to his/her point of view - acknowledge the feelings you hear so that the speaker knows you understand the level of his/her feelings.
- To be understood. An angry person wants someone to appreciate how he/she feels. Try to empathize with his/her experience so that they feel you understand the situation, and acknowledge his/her right to feel the way he/she does.

When you're listening to an angry person:

- Be attentive and patient. Keep in mind that he/she will become less angry as you let him/her express themselves.
- Be sincere. Empathy and validation must be both honest and genuine.
- Be calm. Try to remove your own emotions from the discussion. Remember that an angry person may say inflammatory things in the heat of the moment, but you do not have to react angrily.