

Generating a Robust Spirit of Cooperation

How to resolve conflicts and avoid their harmful effects



Introduction and background

Findings from Linköping University (LiU) employee surveys show scope for improvement at the University. This applies, for example, to working together and managing conflicts. Enhancing all staff members' awareness of their own influence on the collective will to cooperate, which in turn shapes the culture of LiU, is therefore of the utmost importance. The goal is to achieve a robust spirit of cooperation.

This publication sets out to clarify this spirit. It aims to help boost knowledge about conflicts and their impact on interpersonal relationships and the work environment. It is intended to assist staff in their efforts to create a strongly cooperative culture. Used with the Robust Spirit of Cooperation? Have Your Say questionnaire, this booklet can serve as a springboard for discussion in working groups.

What is this spirit?

A robust spirit of cooperation means that managers and subordinates alike at LiU are responsible for ensuring that activities are characterised by open, problem-solving communication. With this spirit, it is natural to show appreciation, give constructive feedback and conduct dialogues and discussions that develop the understanding and skills of those concerned. Irrespective of their duties, positions and roles in the organisation, individuals treat one another with respect; and there is openness about their differences, and their divergent views and wishes.

With a robust spirit of cooperation, people can perceive disagreements and problem situations at an early stage, and prevent them from escalating into serious conflicts. Such conflicts spoil our enjoyment of working life and affect our health, with harmful effects on our work as a result.

Systematic work to generate a robust spirit of cooperation increases LiU's capacity to meet the challenges facing the organisation and its individuals. This work also helps to make people feel secure in their own roles in relation to collective goals, and achieve high-quality results.

Best practice at LiU

Several activities and routines have been devised at LiU that help to bring about a robust spirit of cooperation. For high-quality performance, there must be active efforts in a range of areas:

- Recruitment process and procedure to ensure selection of the most suitable job applicants
- Individual performance reviews, well prepared and implemented, that yield development plans
- Regular workplace get-togethers, with scope for staff questions and discussions
- Surveys for the Employee Satisfaction Index, with relevant questions and follow-up of results
- Clear rehabilitation routines to detect early signs of ill-health and sickness absence
- Work for equal opportunities to ensure that everyone's potential is perceived, including an annual action plan to combat discrimination
- Checklist for the work environment and an annual action plan for preventive efforts
- Management training aimed at, for example, enhancing knowledge about managing conflicts and discussing difficult issues and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of managers
- Instilling priority values of respect, professionalism and integrity in managers and leaders
- Overall work plan to create common goals.

More information (in Swedish) about the different areas is available on the staff department's home page, <http://www.liu.se/om-liu/organisation/uf/pa>.



Guidelines

- Respect all individuals and their distinctiveness.
- Help to create an organisational culture that supports diversity.
- Show an interest in other people's views and a desire to understand their points of view.
- Focus on objective issues rather than people.
- Set store by and show recognition of one another's successes.
- Create and encourage socialising at shared meeting places.
- Initiate enjoyable activities at the workplace or social events outside it.
- Remember that we are all one another's work environment.
- Regard interpersonal difficulties and conflicts as joint problems to solve rather than battles to win.

What the manager should do

- Set a good example.
- Use your leading role to promote openness and an orientation towards problem-solving.
- Take care to ensure that you know about cooperativeness in your own staff area.
- Work to enhance your subordinates' understanding of one another's role functions, to prevent risks of mistaken perceptions of other people's roles, workload etc.
- Provide continuous constructive feedback.
- Include assessment of employees' cooperativeness in your individual performance reviews.
- Follow a fixed agenda at workplace get-togethers, with the work environment as one item.
- Create opportunities for staff to meet as private individuals through joint social activities from time to time.
- Draw up a work plan with strategies, aims and activities for each group based on the 'strategy map'.
- For preventive purposes, carry out a poll in the working group to see whether a robust climate of cooperation exists or anything needs developing; jointly put forward recommendations and solutions for these development areas; and use the Robust Spirit of Cooperation? Have Your Say questionnaire tool.
- Explain the purpose and aims of the reform efforts under way, carry out impact assessments and continuously issue clear information.
- Hone your skills in conflict management through, for example, LiU's management training.
- Learn to see the difference between a constructive conflict that results in personal development and a destructive one that destroys relationships.
- Be observant and pay attention to early signs of conflicts.
- Deal with conflicts.
- Don't be too quick to decide that conflicts cannot be resolved.

Inception, escalation and management of conflicts

When people are having problems getting along and negative conflicts arise at the workplace, it is vital to draw attention to and identify obstacles to cooperation. This enables action to be taken.

Inception: how conflicts at work start

Very often, the fundamental reasons for conflicts are different from those perceived by the people involved. The basic cause may, for example, be an excessive workload, the culture of the organisation, a lack of information or the division of roles. Three types of conflict at a workplace are discernible: conflicts about behaviour; about objective matters and interests; and about structural issues.

Conflicts about behaviour

Individuals can behave in ways that are perceived by others as frustrating or disturbing. Examples of behaviour that may result in conflicts are uncooperativeness, negative attitudes, moodiness, selfish conduct and incompetent leadership.

Conflicts about objective matters and interests

In specific situations or circumstances, people's views, opinions and interests may differ. Conflicts are often about being right or wrong, or something being good or bad. Those involved would not have ended up in a conflict with each other if the circumstances or situation had been different. An example of this kind of situation may be a budget discussion in which those taking part protect their own vested interests.

Conflicts about structural issues

Conflicts of this type do not concern individuals' behaviour or specific, objective matters. Instead, they arise as a result of inadequate organisation. Examples are unclear aims and chains of command, unclear division of roles among managers and insufficient resources to perform the duties concerned.

0. Dialogue			
Irritation and differences of opinion are resolved by discussion.	1. Discussion	Positions are established.	2. Debate
	Discussions are aimed at conveying to the adversary the merits of one's own point of view.		
The parties are interested in and listen to each other's views.	There are negotiations on objective points.	Positions are fixed.	3. Brushing aside
They want to find a solution.	There is a conviction that a solution can be found through objective argument.		
The emphasis is on reaching agreement.		The adversary is perceived as unresponsive to objective arguments.	Ensidigt agerande The parties act unilaterally to push through their own wishes.
		Manipulative methods of debate are used.	
		The undertone in what is said is increasingly important.	The adversary is confronted with accomplished facts.
		The emphasis is on winning the debate.	
			Verbal communication is reduced, leaving scope for fantasies about the adversary's motives.
			The parties' capacity for empathy with one another decreases.
			4. Harassment
			The adversary's position in the group is undermined.
			There is undercover harassment.
			Backbiting takes place.
			Each party has a growing perception that the adversary is troublesome, incompetent and malicious.
			Groups for and against the parties form.

The nine stages of conflict escalation

Revised version of GLASL, F. (1999) *Confronting conflict*. A first-aid kit for handling conflict, Stroud: Hawthorne Press. For a more detailed account of the various stages in the model, read more at <http://www.perspectus.se/tjordan/Escalationmodel.html>.

Escalation: how people in conflict may react

Conflicts may be seen as local force fields that affect everyone who comes close to them. When a conflict has arisen and accumulated enough force, it starts influencing and changing people's thoughts, feelings, wishes and behaviour. People who do not consciously note what is going on are in danger of becoming victims of the force field of a conflict. Examples of how people may react to conflicts are given below.

Perceptions

Individuals attach importance to certain facts and events, while dismissing others as irrelevant. What is perceived as threatening and worrying looms large in our field of vision. The other person's negative and irritating traits become salient while the positive sides disappear out of sight. We focus on the short, rather than the long, term. The feeling that key issues are at stake makes open-mindedness ever more difficult to maintain. Instead, people start to simplify things more and more, for example by laying all the blame on one person. This results in the people involved forming increasingly divergent views of what has happened, why it happened and what should happen in the future.

Emotions

The people involved become ever more easily offended, irritable, distrustful and unsure. Their ability and wish to feel sympathy is markedly reduced. The stress caused by the conflict makes it harder to be open to mixed and contradictory feelings. Those involved therefore become increasingly one-sided in what they feel and in their emotional expressions.

Wishes

The conflict means that someone else prevents us from getting what we want. We expect the other person to use various kinds of tactics and pressures to get his or her own way. This makes it tempting to tie oneself down to extremely specific demands and viewpoints and refuse to make concessions on these. If the conflict becomes really serious, the adversaries begin to see each other as the major problems. Wishes are no longer concerned with our own needs but focus, instead, on the objective of getting rid of the other person.

Behaviour

Irritation affects people's behaviour in different ways, depending on their personality and the situation. In some cases, those involved embark on ever more forceful verbal attacks on each other in an attempt to get the adversary to step down. In other cases, often where people feel severely blocked, they start avoiding each other. People may feel thwarted and think they no longer have any other choice than to hit back in one way or another. One adversary may choose, for example, to 'brush aside' the other. The conflict escalates, becoming ever more toxic, but neither party feels personally responsible for what is happening.

5. Loss of face	6. Strategic threats	7. Painful attacks	8. Elimination	9. Together into the abyss
<p>There is a feeling of seeing through the adversary to his or her true (evil) nature.</p>	<p>The adversary is seen as dangerous.</p>	<p>The parties seek to inflict some form of pain on each other.</p>	<p>The aim is to put the adversary out of action.</p>	<p>The adversary must be crushed, even at the cost of one's own destruction.</p>
<p>Each is convinced of the other's hostility.</p>	<p>Threats of painful action are issued.</p>	<p>The emphasis is on forcing the adversary to give way.</p>	<p>The emphasis is on eliminating him or her.</p>	<p>There is no going back.</p>
<p>There is a conviction that reaching agreement is pointless.</p>	<p>Ultimata are imposed.</p>	<p>The emphasis is on forcing the adversary to give way.</p>	<p>The emphasis is on eliminating him or her.</p>	<p>Confrontation is total.</p>
<p>The emphasis is on excluding the adversary from social fellowship.</p>	<p>There is an emphasis on securing control over the adversary.</p>			

Escalation: the conflict escalation model

Friedrich Glas's model of conflict escalation is presented in the form of a staircase below. The model describes how conflicts can escalate in nine stages. The stages are defined by the norms that govern how the adversaries in a conflict behave towards each other. Norms governing the ways in which they should treat each other and the means of interaction that are permitted normally exist in all social contexts. In the course of an escalating conflict these norms gradually change and people do things they would not normally do. Every stage has typical patterns of the adversaries' views of each other, the predominant atmosphere, the working of the group dynamics and so forth.

Dialogues, discussions and debates occur naturally in our everyday life. When these give way to 'brushing aside' the other person, i.e. when it is no longer the objective issue that is important and the situation becomes personal or even a matter of personal attack, the situation has gone too far. Our scope for influencing the outcome of the conflict depends on how we choose to behave and deal with the situation. We can let the conflict escalate or we can prevent it from going any further, which in turn makes it possible to solve the conflict.

The conflict escalation model may be used, first, as a diagnostic instrument that may provide clues as to where people are in the conflict and when an escalating conflict should be dealt with. Secondly, it can serve as a teaching aid that facilitates our awareness of how to avoid conflict escalation.

What costs may a conflict entail?

Besides the fact that a conflict wears down the individuals involved and the staff surrounding them, there is also a crass financial side. The calculation example, right, applies to a department where there has been a conflict for a year between a manager or leader and an employee. The effects of the conflict are increased short-term absence, a higher staff turnover and production losses. These losses are derived from the estimate that every employee devotes at least 30 minutes a day to talking about the conflict.

Cost of a conflict in financial terms

$30 \text{ minutes} \times 12 \text{ people} \times \text{€}23/\text{hour} \times 200 \text{ days' work} = \text{€}27,600/\text{year}$

Increased short-term absence, $10 \times 5 \text{ days} \times \text{€}184 = \text{€}9,200/\text{year}$

Increased staff turnover, $1 \text{ person} \times \text{€}13,800 = \text{€}13,800/\text{year}$

Production loss for person who resigned, $25\% \times \text{€}27,600 = \text{€}6,900/\text{year}$

The total cost of the conflict is estimated at €57,500 over a year. The costs given in the example are underestimates, if anything, since there may be secondary reasons for missed income may occur. Moreover, the costs are associated with the salary (including employer's social security contributions etc) paid by the people involved, and the above figures are on the low side.



Advice to managers when there is a staff conflict

- Dare to see conflicts and take them seriously.
- Get comprehensive information from both sides.
- Create your own picture of the conflict by talking privately to those involved.
- Investigate the conflict so that you can assess how to proceed.
- Invite the people involved to a meeting and let each of them state their views of the situation while the other listens.
- Let those involved present proposals for solutions, i.e. what should be done, and how, to make cooperation workable in the future.
- Try, through discussion, to reach a solution that everyone is satisfied with and discuss the options for further action. As leader, this means acting for the common good and in the interests of activities as a whole.
- Focus on going forward, not taking a line on who may be right or wrong.
- Talk about the purpose of the conflict resolution and what measures should be taken.
- Document what has been said and that you are in agreement.
- Follow up the conflict resolution.
- If the conflict is hard to resolve, be open about this and get help from experts in the Personnel Department or Feelgood, the University's occupational healthcare partner.
- Review the provisions of legislation, guidelines (for example, those regarding victimisation) and regulations, and what expectations and requirements there are to be taken into consideration.
- Inform the people involved of their scope for obtaining support from a work-environment representative, some other trade-union representative or a care professional in Feelgood, the University's occupational healthcare partner.



Conflict management: general recommendations to employees and managers

- Conflicts are often based on misunderstandings. Try to deal with and resolve the conflicts constructively yourselves when they arise.
- Listen actively to what the other person says.
- Ask the other person to be objectively precise.
- Ask yourself what you have contributed to the conflict. What can you yourself do to end it? How can you both go forward?
- Be objective: avoid personal attacks.
- Define a common objective for the conflict management.
- Strive for a win-win solution.
- Make yourself clear.
- Choose your words carefully.

This material was developed in a subproject in the joint 'Go for Health' (Satsa friskt) project involving Swedish employers and employee organisations (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, SACO; the Public Employees' Negotiation Council, OFR; and the Union of Service and Communication Employees, SEKO).

The overall aims of the projects in 'Go for Health' are to improve the work environment and to strengthen joint efforts by the social partners. This is done on the basis of the cooperation agreement, which is intended to reinforce the dialogue between employers and employee organisations for the purpose of developing activities at LiU.

Questions about the material may be addressed to the Personnel Department at Linköping University.