

Collaborative Problem Solving: An Effective Approach For Managing Conflict In The Workplace

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Abstract

Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) is a method of conflict resolution that was originally developed for working with very difficult children. However, CPS is not just for kids. It is an evidence based practice that can be adapted for use in helping managers to work effectively with their staff when, inevitably, conflict arises. The core of CPS is “Plan B,” a clear, multi-step process for working through conflict. This article describes the conceptual underpinnings of CPS and provides directions, illustrated by examples, for executing Plan B.

Introduction

The workplace is a complex interpersonal environment where conflict inevitably occurs. When handled poorly, conflict undermines relationships, team performance, and morale. It keeps managers and staff alike up at night, dreading the start of a new day at work. When handled well, working through conflict can build trust and create a positive work environment where people work effectively together. College level business programs have become increasingly aware of the psychological and sociological complexity of the work environment. They now routinely offer courses that address organizational behavior, job stress, and managing people. There are courses offered that teach conflict resolution skills. These are designed to teach students how to handle labor-management disputes (Beer, J. & Stief, E., 1997; Deutsch, M. & Coleman, P., 2000) as well as how to be successful in business negotiations (Fisher, R & Ury, W., 1991). However, they are not designed to teach prospective managers a systematic approach for handling day to day conflict in the workplace. This article has been written to address that need.

Conflict

There are many theories which attempt to explain the nature of conflict and a wide range of practical approaches have been developed for managing it (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001). Goleman's (1998) theory of emotional intelligence is widely known in the business community because its skill-based approach lends itself well to a results-driven environment (Jordan and Troth, 2004, 2006). In Goleman's model, the skills needed to manage conflict are a combination of Social Awareness and Relationship Management. CPS represents an example of a specific methodology for learning the listening, communication, and negotiating skills that are needed to successfully negotiate and resolve disagreements and tense situations.

Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) is a method of conflict resolution that was originally developed for working with very difficult children. It teaches parents, teachers, and mental health professionals how to understand and work together with challenging kids to solve problems in mutually satisfactory ways. It is not well known to the business community or business literature.

CPS was originated by Dr. Ross Greene and subsequently developed by Dr. Greene and Dr. Stuart Ablon, and their associates at Massachusetts General Hospital and the Harvard Medical School. An initial series of brief reports (Ablon, S., Edwards, G., Green, R., Goring, J., Henin, A., Markey, J., Monuteaux, M., Rabbitt, S., Reazer-Blakely, L., 2004) documenting the effectiveness of the approach in reducing conflict at home with very challenging children was followed by a study that demonstrated how CPS could be used to reduce the use of restraints in child and adolescent psychiatric inpatient units (Green, R., Ablon, S., & Martin, A. (2006)) and residential treatment programs (Martin, A., Mohr, W., Olson, J., & Pumariega, A. 2009). Their

comprehensive approach for working with difficult children (Green, R. 2001; Green, R. & Ablon, S., 2006) has been widely disseminated through seminars and workshops offered throughout the United States.

As more people have learned CPS, it has been applied in an increasingly wide range of settings with diverse populations and provocative results. Its effectiveness has been demonstrated everywhere from homes and schools to residential treatment facilities, hospitals and even corrections facilities. We have found this approach to be coherent, accessible, and applicable to the workplace setting.

The CPS Philosophy

It is essential for the managers to establish an expectation among themselves and with their staff that conflict will be handled in a consistent manner. Managers also need to have and to communicate a clear philosophy of conflict management. The original philosophy of CPS is that *“kids do well if they can. If they can’t, we adults need to figure out why, so we can help.”* Translated into the workplace, this reads, *“staff do well at their jobs if they can. If they can’t, managers need to help them figure out why, so they can.”*

The CPS philosophy informs us that the manager’s explanation of a staff’s behavior, attitude, etc. will guide his or her intervention with that staff member. Conventional wisdom tells the manager that staff’s challenging behavior is usually designed to get things or avoid things, such as getting attention or avoiding work. Flowing from a conventional explanation like this, a conventional response to such behavior would be to ignore it or try to motivate more compliant behavior. There certainly is a logic to conventional wisdom and some value to the conventional response if conventional explanations are correct. Staff generally do respond to consistent rewards and punishments and also to being ignored (which is a form of punishment). These approaches can work. They just don’t work as effectively in most situations as a transparent, systematic, and collaborative method of conflict resolution. And they definitely don’t tend to work in the most challenging of circumstances and can in fact be counterproductive.

The CPS Approach To Managing Conflict

When presented with conflict or an expectation that a staff member is not meeting, managers generally have three choices: Plan A: impose their will; Plan B: collaborative problem solving; Plan C: drop the issue, at least for now.

Which option managers chose depends on the long term and short term goals managers have with individual staff; how far along they and their staff are in realizing those goals; and the situation/problem at hand. As managers come to know more about each of these Plans and as they improve their understanding of how each of

their staff respond to them in different situations, they will gain more confidence in which Plan to choose at any given point in time.

In executing Plan A, managers are exercising their prerogative as the person in authority. This is what French and Raven (1959) refer to as “legitimate power.” There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach. Sometimes it represents the shortest distance between two points. Sometimes staff really want their manager to make an executive decision and get on with it rather than take the time needed to arrive at a consensus.

More often, Plan A is experienced by staff in the same way they experienced a parent saying, “because I said so.” Staff may comply because there was no real choice, but they remain angry and consequently find passive ways to resist. Managers may be able to tell themselves, “my staff did what I told them to do”, but it is highly likely that the situations which required the boss to give these orders will keep popping up. Plan A can be effective; it can also be risky and unproductive. It rarely solves tough problems in durable ways. It certainly does not teach staff the skills that would be needed to resolve such issues in the future without the intervention of their managers. It definitely does not build the kind of collaborative relationships that are key to effective management in organizations that require group problem solving to succeed.

Plan C has obvious advantages. “Pick your battles” is sage and time-tested advice, but that there is a significant downside to this strategy. Managers are likely to feel that when they execute Plan C they will be viewed by staff as dodging the issue or capitulating. They might then be concerned that their staff, in observing their managers avoid a conflict, will be emboldened to continue with this behavior. To execute Plan C properly, the manager must recognize that Plan C is not giving in. It is a well thought out decision. What is giving in? A failed Plan A leading to Plan C! In other words, the manager tries to make staff do something, it does not occur, and then the manager drops the expectation. The key to using Plan C successfully is to only use it tactically. Managers use it when they have reasoned that a particular conflict is not worth the time it will take to effectively work it through; because the timing is not right for dealing with the issue; or simply because they or their organizations have bigger fish to fry for the moment.

Plan B is the middle way. Plan B is the heart and soul of CPS: it is collaborative problem solving. At the end of a successfully executed Plan B the manager can say to him or herself, “we worked it out. We solved the problem.....together.” Obviously CPS did not invent the idea that people at different levels of authority can jointly work out their problems. What CPS does exceptionally well is to describe a series of research-based and easily understandable steps for accomplishing this goal.

Plan B

Our description of Plan B below differs somewhat from how Plan B is described in working with challenging kids. The modifications to Plan B flow from our experience applying it in the workplace. Plan B consists of two phases. In the first phase, the manager and staff member form a collaborative relationship. They take turns working towards a mutual definition of their problem. This definition serves as the basis for entering into the second phase, which is negotiation and problem solving. The first phase generally takes a lot longer than the second. It's a lot like painting a room in a house. To paint well, two-thirds of the time needs to be spent prepping. Only one-third of the time will actually be devoted to applying the paint. The same holds true for two people trying to solve a problem. It is the "prep work" that makes the difference between an effort that lasts and one that just buys a little time until the next conflict. Although the first phase of Plan B is broken into three steps, it is often necessary to go back and forth between steps to complete this prep work. Plan B should be thought of as a process, not a technique.

When Plan B is executed after careful thought has been given, it is called Proactive Plan B. However, sometimes situations quickly arise and it is not possible to take the time to thoughtfully develop a Plan B. The situation demands that the manager responds immediately. When managers apply the principles of CPS on the fly, without a clear plan, this is called Emergency Plan B. It is less likely to be effective than Proactive Plan B, but it is much more likely to be effective than trying to respond to a conflict in the moment without a set of guiding principles. Since chronic problems with staff not meeting expectations in the work place are quite common, managers who are skilled in using CPS will rarely need to use Emergency Plan B with staff they have come to know. Rather, they will have planned, proactive conversations with staff to develop an approach together that they can then use when the need arises in the future.

A general point to note: managers should avoid being sucked into managing conflict when emotions are raw. Take the initiative. Pick the time and place to implement Proactive Plan B following the steps described below. This will yield the best results.

First Phase: Form A Collaborative Relationship And Mutually Define The Problem

Step 1: Empathize with staff's view of the situation and define the problem from their point of view. This step is complete when the manager has received explicit confirmation from staff that they have been heard

This is the most crucial Step of Plan B. The temptation will be for managers to state their point of view first. This temptation must be resisted. Let staff go first. To do

otherwise makes it highly likely that Plan B will fail. Start with a brief, neutral observation. Then STOP and LISTEN.

The manager's objective in Step 1 is to make a simple, clear, and indisputably fact-based statement that can serve as the starting point for discussion. It is NOT a statement of the problem. It is an objective statement regarding a situation or a statement regarding what the manager felt in a specific situation. Such a statement, followed by silence, creates a "space" that allows staff to initiate a conversation from their perspective. In Step 1 the manager does not communicate a perspective. The manager's goal is to initiate a conversation from the perspective of a neutral observer and then to gather information. The goal is to understand the staff member's concerns or perspective about a given problem in as specific a fashion as possible.

Here are some examples of an opening neutral observation. Readers will be following the manager's discussions with Mary, and Jim for the remainder of this article.

- *Mary, the next thing I'd like to talk about in supervision is an interaction we had last week. When we started talking about your sales targets for next year it seemed like you had a reaction to what I said. Could you fill me in a bit on how this conversation went for you? <STOP. Let your staff member speak.>*
- *Jim, I've noticed that you rarely drop by my office my office anymore to catch me up on what you are working on or to ask for my advice. . <STOP. Let your staff member speak. >*

The beauty of simply making a neutral observation and then listening to a staff member's response is that at least 50% of the time, when this is done properly, managers discover that the feelings and perceptions that led them to believe there was a problem were, in fact, inaccurate. Finding out there really is no problem spares managers and their staff the time and trouble of working through a conflict that is non-existent. It spares the manager from having had an interaction with that made them look foolish. And if there is a problem, the manager often end up being surprised to learn that staff's concerns were different than they assumed.

However, when staff's response to the manager's neutral observation confirms that there is indeed a conflict or a problem, the manager needs to continue with Step 1. This involves a process of drilling down, using questioning, reflective listening, educated guessing, and providing reassurance until staff's viewpoint is clearly understood and stated in a manner that results in their saying, "yes, you've got that right."

The technique of reflective listening was developed by Carl Rogers (1951, 1961), who established an evidence-based approach to counseling that was based called

“person centered psychotherapy”. A core requirement of his counseling approach was for the counselor to demonstrate what he called “accurate empathy” through “reflective listening.” The examples below illustrate reflective listening in action in the context of work-related conflict.

- *Mary, I want to make sure I am understanding you correctly. What I hear you saying is that over the past two months I have been putting a lot of pressure on you to increase your sales and that my taking out the weekly sales figures to look at each time we get together is just making you anxious. It is not helping you figure out how to meet your sales targets. Is that accurate? <STOP. Listen.>*
- *Jim, let me know if I've got this right. It seems that my promoting Bill surprised you and led to your feeling devalued and angry. You expected to be the one to move into the new position. You feel that my decision did not take into account all the hard work you have done for the department and that I play favorites. Is that a good summary of what you just said? <STOP. Listen.*

Most often the manager will not immediately receive the sign-off needed to proceed to Step 2. There will be a series of statements and restatements, with considerable questioning, educated guessing, and requests for clarification along the way. In addition, managers are going to need to provide ongoing reassurance to staff that they have a real interest in understanding their staff's point of view and that these kind of discussions do not morph into Plan A. The more often managers use Plan B, the less reassurance they will need to provide because staff will have gained confidence based on experience, that their perspective matters and that conflicts can be resolved with their managers collaboratively. Simple phrases, accompanied by eye contact and a slight lean forward, easily communicate reassurance:

- *Thanks, that's helpful to know.*
- *I'm not quite sure I'm understanding what you are saying accurately yet, so I'd like to ask you another question.*
- *Ah, I think I'm beginning to understand.*
- *I appreciate your restating that again for me. Thanks*

Step 2: Define the problem from your point of view and wait to hear a validating response.

Managers have a valid point of view too. Being heard is not a one-way street. In stating their perspective, it is essential that managers frame what they say as “my point of view” or “my view of the situation.” It is very easy and natural for managers to imply that their point of view is the truth. If this attitude creeps into their words or tone, it will undo Steps 1 and 2. Be clear. Be direct. Be frank. Be concise. Managers must not imply that their views are more accurate or valid than that of their staff.

Proactive Plan B provides the opportunity to carefully prepare a statement of concerns and to practice stating them. Writing them down prior to discussion is very helpful. It is even more helpful to say them out loud, either in a private space or to a peer or supervisor. (It is not necessary to “name names” to get useful feedback.) Hearing concerns stated out loud often makes it clear whether or not the manager has a legitimate concern and if that concern rises to a level that it needs to be talked about. Managers do not live in a perfect world and do not have the time to resolve every conflict that occurs. Managers need to be strategic in deciding which conflicts merit this level of effort. If staff are exhibiting an ongoing pattern of behavior that significantly impact their work and/or the work of their coworkers (including their own managers), taking the time to think through and implement Plan B will be a valuable investment of the manager’s time and energy.

Here are some examples of Step 2, which build on the examples provided above.

- *Mary, my concern is that our department’s sales figures have not been meeting target for the past two quarters, yours included. I want to be helpful to you in figuring out what you can do to turn things around. During supervision I take out your sales figures so that we can monitor how our efforts are working. Having this data in front of me when I talk with my boss is useful to me and to her, but perhaps you are not finding this to be the case. <WAIT AND LISTEN FOR A VALIDATING RESPONSE.>*

If the manager thought Mary could benefit from more direction, a couple of alternatives to the illustration above could have been “*Is this making sense to you?*” or “*Could you feed back to me what you hear me saying? It is important to me to know that I have been communicating my viewpoint clearly.*”

- *Jim, I am aware of all the time you put in on evenings and weekends to get the job done. I am also aware that you have been working here longer than Bill. I value your commitment to our company, our department, and to me. Deciding who this position should go to was a tough choice for me to make and I do believe you could have done the job. This was a situation where there were two qualified people and I had to chose the person I thought could do the job best at this point in time with the particular challenges we are facing today. I am concerned that the choice I made leaves you feeling devalued and that it seems to have hurt our relationship. I am used to us both feeling comfortable when we are working together. It does not feel that way to me now and that concerns me.*

It would have been tempting for the manager to say, “you seem to be angry and upset” or “I am responding to your discomfort with me.” Both would be “you statements” as opposed to “I statements.” The problem with “you statements” is that they put the speaker in the position of telling the other person what he or she is feeling. The manager cannot know that. No one likes other people telling them

what they are feeling. When they do that, we pull away from them and disengage from communication.

Step 3: Invite staff to work together on solving a jointly defined problem. Obtain agreement.

If a manager and staff have successfully completed the preceding steps, they are now ready to create an agreement that forms the basis for solving a problem, one that they jointly define. Step 3 is commonly initiated by a statement like this:

I think you have a good understanding of my point of view and I believe I now have a pretty good understanding of yours. We both have concerns. Yours are <restate staff members concerns> and mine are <restate the managers concerns>. How bout we put our heads together and find a solution for these concerns that works for both of us?

Note: stating the last sentence in the form of a question provides staff an opportunity to let the manager know whether or not they feel that they are ready to begin problem solving. Alternative wording, using the examples from above would be:

- *Mary, it seems that you and I view these reviews of your sales numbers quite differently. I would suggest we see if there isn't some way to modify what we are currently doing, or find another way altogether to get to the same end goal of improving sales. Shall we do that?*
- *Jim, it seems we have some repair work to do here. Do you agree?*

If the answer received was, “yes, let’s do that”, the manager acknowledges that there is an agreement and then proceeds to negotiation and problem solving. This acknowledgment accomplishes two very important things. First, it is a set-up for beginning Phase 2. Second, it provides a double-check that both the manager and staff are ready to move on. If the manager does not hear a clear “yes” to the question just posed or hears “no”, then the manager needs to keep working at **Step 3** until a clear “yes” is communicated. Only when ‘yes’ is heard is it time to proceed to the second phase of Plan B.

Second Phase: Negotiation And Problem Solving

There is not a stepwise road map to follow for this phase of CPS. Phase 2 does not lend itself to that kind of approach. The process is more circular than linear. The variations are endless. However, there are some general principles for you to follow.

1. Base your negotiation and problem solving activities on the specifics learned during Phase One.

2. Create an opportunity for your staff and/or you to develop or enhance interpersonal and other skills. Brainstorming potential solutions together represents a learning opportunity for both of you.
3. The solution should provide an opportunity for incremental learning. We generally learn new skills best when they are broken into bite size pieces.
4. Keep *your* solution(s) in your back pocket. Give your staff the first opportunity to propose a solution. Ideally, the solution will be one that is arrived at collaboratively and does not “belong” to either individual.
5. Resist turning negotiation and problem solving into a process of determining who is at fault. The natural tendency in such dialogues is to drift towards assigning blame. Neither you nor your staff are immune from this tendency.
6. To the extent it is possible, frame your discussion of the problem at hand in such a way that the solutions you both arrive at and the problem solving skills your staff develops can be generalized to other situations.

Here are some examples of how negotiation and problem solving might go following these principles. The dialogue picks up where it left off, above. The manager has proposed

Mary: Yes, I'm really worn out by what we've been doing. I dread supervision and our endless discussion of my sales figures. To tell you the truth, I've been thinking about working somewhere else and have updated my resume. I'd rather not leave if I don't have to. Until my sales took a nose dive, I liked working here and I liked working with you.

Manager: Then lets see if we can find an approach that is helpful to you. I want you to succeed. I've heard your concerns about the pressure you feel from our weekly review of sales figures and you have heard my concerns about meeting our sales targets. What are your thoughts about how we can solve our dilemma?

Mary: Isn't that your job to figure out?

Manager: No. It's our job.

Mary: <Silence>

Manager: <Silence>

Mary: Hmmm. Well, maybe if I got the most recent sales figure before I came to supervision that would be helpful.

Manager: Sure, you could review them before hand. There would be no surprises. I like it,

Mary: And I could do my own analysis ahead of time. I wouldn't be forced to have an instant answer about how I'm going to get everything fixed.

Manager: If I got the report to you at least two days before our weekly meeting would that work for you?

Mary: Yes.

Manager: And would it work even better for you if we met every other week rather than weekly? I do feel a need to stay on top of this situation, but perhaps I'm making matters worse by meeting with you so often.

Mary: That would be a lot better. Thanks. I had been thinking about that, but thought you'd never go for it. This is a pleasant surprise.

The manager in this illustration is smart not to engage Mary about her thoughts and plans about leaving. That would be a distraction from an effort to help her succeed at her current job. So, the manager presses ahead, asking Mary if she has any ideas about how to solve the problem, which is carefully framed as “our dilemma.” She doesn't bite initially and expresses her frustration and anger at her boss through silence. The manager wisely lets the silence be and does not rush in to fill it, which would deprive Mary of the opportunity to express herself through words. With patience, this happens.

Once Mary feels that it safe to do so – the conversation moves very quickly into a problem solving mode. The solutions were not hard to come by. They rarely are. It is the preconditions for problem solving that are the challenge. Note that the manager gets swept into the spirit of problem solving too. When Mary “gives” a little, takes a risk and offers an idea, the manager feels inclined to give a little too. His idea to change the frequency of his oversight is not just an intellectual “ah-ha”, it is a product of openness being matched by openness. It is an openness not just to new ideas, but to self-reflection and taking responsibility. His real “ah-ha” is an emotional recognition that he had been just as stubborn and uncreative as Mary. Having followed Plan B, both Mary and her manager have succeeded in breaking through that ice, allowing their working relationship to get back on track. The manager was managing once again in a way that he could feel good about and Mary was feeling some hope that supervision with her boss could help her figure out how to succeed at her job.

Jim: I've been in this position now for four years. The one that you just gave to Bill is the only one I saw as an opportunity for advancement. My wife is in a dead-end job too and we've got a second kid coming in March.

Manager: *So, I'm hearing that in addition to your feeling devalued by my hiring choice, you're feeling a lot of pressure to be earning more.*

Jim: *Yeah, that's for sure.*

Manager: *That helps me understand the tension I'm feeling between us. Are you wanting to work on this together or are you thinking that working elsewhere might be a better option for you?*

Jim: *I've thought about that, but I'd rather have this job work out. I basically like working here.*

Manager: *You like working here, but need to see a path to advancement and increased earning. I had a tough choice to make and made it; I had no intent to devalue your work, though I understand how it felt that way to you. Should we put our heads together and see what ideas we can come up with that address both of our concerns?*

Jim: *Hmmmm. I guess so.*

Manager: *What are you thinking might helpful?*

Jim: *I need to see a way for me to be making more money. Maybe in the short run it doesn't have to be a new position. Is there some other way?*

Manager: *It occurs to me that there might an opportunity for you to do some special projects that are outside the scope of your current position. They could be done on weekends if you are open to that. But come to think of it, we have not reviewed your job description in quite awhile. It seems to me that there is a disconnect between your current level of responsibilities and what your job description says. If that is the case, company policy allows me to adjust your salary. If either of these approaches is possible, does it sound like a solution to you? Would you be feeling differently about working with me?*

Jim: *Yes and yes. Thanks.*

It is clear from Jim saying, "yeah, that's for sure" that the manager made an error in his initial execution of Plan B. His expression of empathy (**Step 2**) was inadequate because it was incomplete. It only addressed the devaluation Jim felt when his manager awarded the new position to Bill rather than to him. Jim had not told the manager, nor was the manager able to discern the monetary pressure he was under. Until Jim heard from his manager that he understood this aspect of his dilemma, he was not ready to hear what the manager's concerns were or to join him in problem solving. Second, the manager had proceeded to problem solving without clearly getting agreement from Jim that he was ready or wanting to do this. So, the

first thing the manager did once he realized he made these errors was to backtrack and correct them. This second time around, the manager (correctly) did not proceed to problem solving until Jim had acknowledged that he had been heard and had explicitly agreed to move on to the next step.

When the manager surmises that Jim is most likely thinking about looking outside the company for advancement, he calls that out, which is exactly the opposite of what the manager did with Mary. With Mary, the manager saw discussion of quitting as a diversion from Plan B. It was a potential sink hole. With Jim, the manager did not feel like Jim was making a threat; he was just stating an emotionally charged fact. So, the manager chose to put Jim's potential leaving front and center in the discussion. This made an immediate empathic connection with Jim and let him know that a serious problem solving discussion had to somehow address the reality that was behind his thoughts about working elsewhere.

Third Phase: Troubleshooting Plan B

Because Plan B is so hard and human beings and human interactions are so complex that Plan B often does not unfold as neatly as we have described above. When managers find themselves stuck or the results of Plan B unsatisfactory, you will need to do some troubleshooting. Troubleshooting is what managers do. How often do *anyone's* plans unfold perfectly?

When a manager is running into problems with Plan B, there are a number of common errors to consider as their cause. **You think you are doing Plan B, but you are really doing Plan A.** It is easy to dress up a Plan A approach to look like Plan B. Acting from a position of authority can be done quite subtly, so subtly that managers trick themselves into thinking they have worked the steps of Plan B, particularly the step that involves empathizing with their staff's view of the situation. **Perfunctory empathy** is a common mistake, one that leads to a breakdown of the process. When staff have not been heard they simply will not engage in the other steps of Plan B.

Missing Steps or doing the Steps out of order are two additional common mistakes. Some of the scenarios presented above illustrate these problems in action. What managers do when they have figured this out is simple, they go back and work the steps again, this time in the right order.

When managers realizes that they have done the Steps out of order or missed a Steps, it is generally not a good idea to switch to Plan C. However, doing so should not be ruled out entirely. The following are criteria, all of which must be met, for switching to Plan C.

- The conflict is not significant

- It would be a lot of work to go back and redo the steps of Plan B
- The manager has generated some good will through what has been done thus far to resolve the conflict
- The manager can clearly state a rationale to staff for dropping the issue
- The issue is not swept under the rug. Before it is dropped, the issue is clearly stated.
- Staff agrees to dropping the issue for now
- Dropping the issue does not penalize staff

Another common mistake in executing Plan B is the manager **putting solutions on the table instead of concerns** during Step 3. Many managers are apt to rush to solutions before hearing the concerns of others or stating their own. Managers are generally good problem solvers and this ability has a seductive tendency to lure managers of both sexes to get to the “good part” quickly. This will backfire. Managers can’t rush the process and expect to succeed. Managers need to be aware that difficult problems will likely require more than one discussion and that the complete Plan B process does not need to be completed in a single sitting. Finally, managers should realize that despite the best laid plans of Plan B, it is frequently an adventure. If the manager does a good job of empathic listening and detective work, additional concerns and issues may surface which may require more immediate attention than what the manager intended to discuss.

When Plan B is not working, the manager should also consider a number of personal factors that are independent of the manager’s execution of Plan B. It could be that either the manager or staff are under severe stress. Perhaps the manager is working with a staff member who is more comfortable with a Plan A approach than a Plan B approach. It is essential for managers to adapt their approach to the individual they are working with.

Conclusion

This is hard. CPS is not conceptually difficult to master, but putting it to use takes lots of practice and perseverance. There will be successes and setbacks. Managers should keep these points in mind as they make the effort to translate the concepts and procedures into a useful skill set.

- Early on, CPS can feel unnatural, but over time, a Plan B “rhythm” should develop
- Very difficult problems may require more than one discussion.
- Sometimes it’s necessary to take a break from the discussion and return to it later, after both parties have had time to think separately about what has been said.
- The first solution seldom solves the problem durably.

- Just talking with staff about an issue is not the same thing as doing Plan B. Plan B is a very particular kind and sequence of talking.

Our experience, and the experience of thousands of people who use CPS is that collaborative problem solving provides people of diverse backgrounds and a wide range of interpersonal abilities an easy to understand, straight-forward method of working through conflicts. It does take time (which translates into money), but the investment will pay for itself many times over when managers experience first hand how much more productive their teams are when a Plan B culture is established.

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