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# NZ has answers to work conflict

Kiwi workplace tool uses elements of nature to help people function as a team, says **Bronwyn Anderson**

If you dread heading to the office because you have difficulties with a work colleague, you may not be alone, as surveys suggest workplace conflict is on the rise.

In a survey of employers' experiences of managing workplace conflict published last year by the British-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, almost two-thirds of respondents noted a rise in disciplinary and grievance cases.

Findings said: "The scale of workplace conflict is remarkable and has increased during the recession."

In New Zealand, with increasing levels of restructuring and change, many people are finding themselves in new teams, with different colleagues and reporting structures.

Not only is the process of restructuring stressful, employees are required to perform well within these new teams very quickly, sometimes leading to a disconnect between performance expectations, lack of role clarity, and a poor understanding of new colleagues. These situations can be rich breeding grounds for conflict.

But not all conflict is bad. It is usually a necessary and constructive part of a team's development.

United States psychologist Bruce Tuckman's model of group development proposes forming, storming, norming and performing as usual stages teams must go through in order to grow.

All these phases involve understanding differences and conflict, and are necessary for the team to face challenges, tackle problems, find solutions, plan work and get results.

Insufficient time invested in building cohesion can cause teams to dis-

integrate and, ultimately, not get on.

One common cause of workplace conflict is poor communication and a lack of clear organisational values as part of the workplace culture.

Ineffective leadership can contribute, particularly when organisational values are not reinforced by addressing non-acceptable behaviour.

A lack of training in how to deal with upsetting behaviours constructively and assertively for both managers and staff means in many workplaces conflict escalates un-

**One common cause of workplace conflict is poor communication.**

necessarily. I find that, in most cases, managing conflict constructively and promptly becomes easier with the availability of the right tools.

I was once asked to help in a situation where, while the perceived "victim" of the conflict was removed for his safety, the rest of the team had suffered from unsubstantiated reports of bullying and did not get offered help for many months.

Customer service and productivity suffered, the manager lost control of the team's work direction and trust was severely damaged with all those involved.

The team members were variously traumatised by the ongoing conflict and the length of time spent to rectify matters. Many suffered loss of sleep, took stress leave and morale amongst those left plummeted.

The cost to the organisation in reputation, productivity and long-

term trust was significant, not to mention the cost of consultants and mediators to get this worked through.

A manager's obsession with "getting it right" and "doing it their way" or having perceived favourites can be other causes of conflict.

Sometimes managers are unaware of any rising conflict or try to push it under the carpet.

A 2010 Labour Department study seems to support this view.

In it, a private mediator argued that the causes of workplace conflict in New Zealand lie in hierarchical workplace structures, a workplace climate based on managerial prerogative, individualism rather than teamwork and suppression of conflict.

The effects of workplace conflict can be severe, but using the right tools to prevent it – and address it when it occurs – can engender not only more harmonious workplaces, but more productive ones, too.

One tool I use is TetraMap, a workplace tool for better behaviour and performance, to help both parties understand differences in how they prefer to operate and make constructive changes when facing conflicting situations.

TetraMap, which was developed in New Zealand, works by utilising the elements of nature – earth, air, water and fire – as a metaphor to describe people and their preferences and creating connections through common understanding and vision.

It helps teams to learn how to work interdependently, while appreciating the value of different contributions and perspectives for win-win outcomes.



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The TetraMap programme was recently used by the Hamilton City Council, where feedback from its teams showed staff gained a greater appreciation of each other's strengths and weaknesses. As a result, the staff started to understand the individual pressures and stresses a little more, helping in fostering respect and reducing conflicts.

I have used TetraMap with several

university teams to give them a base for understanding and working with differences, rather than being judgmental and taking things personally. One academic team in particular has been so impressed with the benefits of this model that they have offered it to all the tutors who work with them.

Conflict is a given, but ongoing conflict doesn't need to be. With

some tools to shift mindsets and promote understanding, you cannot only address it effectively but also create a more positive and productive environment, one that you look forward to returning to after every holiday.

● Bronwyn Anderson is a registered psychologist (industrial organisational) based in Otaki.



**A lack of training in how to deal with upsetting behaviour can see conflict in the workplace escalate unnecessarily.**