Managing Differences and Conflict

In any relationship or group there will be differences. People think differently, have different values; interpret information in different ways. Differences are the basis on which individuals; relationships and organisations grow and change. Sameness may seem attractive but it leads, in the long term, to complacency and stagnation.

In effective organisations or teams there is a shared sense of unity, of commitment to common objectives and ideals. But there is also a shared sense of diversity. Differences are welcomed, there are clear opportunities for people to express and discuss their differing views, and people are committed to finding ways to operate which value everyone's contributions and beliefs.

This does not mean everyone can always get what he or she wants. People must recognise they are working together as a group and sometimes may have to do things they do not want to do, go along with decisions with which they do not fully agree or even, if the group goes in a completely unacceptable direction, sever their connection with the group.

Conflict arises when differences cannot be satisfactorily dealt with. Differences become conflict if:

- People are unwilling to accept the validity of differing values, priorities or views of what is 'right' or 'important';

- Individuals or the group as a whole have different or unclear standards for action, behaviour or performance and common standards cannot be agreed;

- Something (money, attention, workload, responsibility) is, or is perceived to be, unfairly distributed;

- People feel an individual or collective need to win, be right, get their own way or dominate;

- People succumb to fear, distrust and the need to define anyone different or unknown as 'other', 'outsider' or 'enemy'

- The people involved do not want change

- There are unclear or non-existent procedures for discussion and resolving differences before they escalate into conflict

- A person has a personal 'trouble' which they are unable or unwilling to share and which unbalances their ability to 'reason' or effects their behaviour with others

Conflict is difficult but if managed well can provide an opportunity for a group and all the people involved learning, growing and changing.

It is a mockery to talk about equal opportunities or commitment to the community if people are unwilling to value everyone's ideas, opinions and contributions.

One positive outcome of dealing with conflict is learning how to handle people with problems. Not everyone is comfortable with facing aggression, disruption or downright rudeness, but in order to assure that harmony, as far as is possible, reigns either in our lives or within our working environment then such people need to be 'faced'.

A few guidelines for handling conflict, whether with staff, colleagues or 'friends'

- Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself - set a good example
- Try to understand why someone has become confrontational, aggressive or rude
- When faced with someone who is being difficult - do something; failure to act can often make the situation worse, and cause you distress worrying about why the situation took place. Immediate action can very often stop whatever the issue is before it escalates into a major problem.

- If the person causing the difficulty is overly sensitive then assure them that, because of their excellent knowledge in their field they are an important part of the team (or your life)

- Point out that mistakes, hiccups occasionally arise and are normal and they can be caught and corrected later

- Recall for them occasions where their actions, decision making has been helpful and that their behaviour in this instance is out of character and tell them how that effects you.

If the situation reaches a temper tantrum

- Let tempers calm down and then have a heart to heart talk. Point out that it isn't always easy to control tempers but that such behaviour is unacceptable to you

- If another outburst occurs either ask the person to leave the room - or you leave making it clear that you will return when the temper tantrum has gone away

- Keep your cool - never lose your self-control otherwise the situation is lost

- If the behaviour is completely out of character - then you need to question and probe until the reason for the behaviour change is explained.

- If you are personally unable to do this then seek advise from a third person who knows you both and whose confidentiality and integrity is not in doubt

- If you are working or living in a highly pressurised world and tend to be surrounded by such persons it might be helpful to undertake a counselling course. This will provide you with some useful tools which will enable you to deal with the difficult person or the 'conflict' whilst ensuring that you do not become damaged yourself.