Conflicts are a part of both our personal lives and our work, whether we are taking an active part in it as a party to the conflict or as a formal or informal mediator, or as an observer. Although this article will focus on workplace conflicts, many of the approaches suggested also will work in the community, the family, or with other conflict situations. On a dairy farm both personal and work conflicts can impact the well-being of everybody involved, as well as the bottom line. Because people on a farm are often close to each other, personal relationships and work may not be kept separate easily.

A herdsman or owner may perceive some of his or her employees as “coming with baggage” or at times be overwhelmed by being asked to help with issues in an employee’s personal life. Being informed of problems unrelated or only indirectly related to work and being asked for help or support is actually a sign of great trust. This trust opens the door to good working relationships and developing a productive, long-term employee.

Building Trust
Trust is a prerequisite to addressing conflicts in a productive manner and increases the chances of bringing them to a positive solution. To improve employee satisfaction with supervision and develop trust, focus on a couple of things. First, a supervisor needs to interact frequently with his or her employees. In most farms, this is not an issue, because many supervisors are working supervisors and do not distance themselves from the employees they supervise. The interaction between the supervisor and each employee should be primarily positive. Then employees will expect mostly positive feedback. Otherwise, they may become defensive and unwilling to listen.

Second, supervisors and owners are typically setting the example for the type of behavior that is expected of employees. Being unfriendly and unapproachable will set a grouchy tone and communicate that “this is what it is like to work here.” Expecting employees to “do as I say, not as I do” is not effective. With respect to following safety protocol or...
biohazard procedures managers may have experienced that workers tend to model their behavior after their supervisors’ behavior. A similar process is likely to happen regarding politeness and work climate.

Third, listening to employees is another prerequisite of competent management. This skill is necessary to create a productive and content workforce. There are five steps to active or empathic listening.

- Let the other person do most of the talking.
- Be open and non-judgmental.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Avoid premature conclusions or advice.
- Assist or advise only when asked to. When we open our ears and minds to others we are able to lead them and help them develop their potential.

Prepare Before Approaching a Difficult Situation

Success requires preparation, whether involved in a conflict or wanting to intervene as a neutral party. As a party to a conflict, preparation starts with yourself by asking, “What did I contribute to this situation? What did I do that created this problem? What did I not do that could have prevented this from happening or improved the situation?” Also ask yourself whether you are ready to deal with the problem at this time and what the consequences may be. Don’t allow yourself to be dragged into a discussion before you are ready. As a supervisor, you know that there is a fine line between giving yourself enough time to prepare and waiting too long for a good opportunity to address a problem.

When intervening in a conflict, this principle can be applied to helping others prepare. In dispute resolution, conflict parties often meet separately with the facilitator before getting together. This is called a pre-caucus. The pre-caucus decreases emotional tension, and helps people clarify what issues need to be brought to the table. Once the parties to a conflict have come together, the next step is to create a safe climate. Promoting psychological and physical safety will increase the chances of a mutually acceptable solution. When not feeling safe, people may react defensively, be unwilling to contribute, or even use verbal or physical violence. Creating a climate of mutual respect and shared purpose is the best preparation for developing win-win solutions that benefit everybody involved.

Clearly Define the Problem

Being explicit about what seems to be the problem is necessary before considering solutions. A herdsman who is upset about an employee not cleaning the milking parlor properly may be tempted to say, “You are lazy.” This is not a description of the problem, but is an assumption about the individual’s character, which may or may not be based on facts. Each party to a conflict needs to stick to the facts and avoid using inflammatory comments. Facts are what can be seen, heard, or measured. If a concern, such as someone being inconsiderate, is part of the problem, then this can be stated in a tentative way or as a question. For example, Susan feels that Juan’s comment about the food she had for lunch was addressed at her being overweight. She closes her opening statements with, “You seemed to be saying, I shouldn’t eat that much. I felt hurt by that. Or did you mean to say something else?”

Two things are accomplished here. First, conflict parties need to agree on facts and this is often possible by keeping the emotions and character statements out of the discussion. Second, ending with a question allows the other party to tell their side of the story and often provides opportunity to clarify misunderstandings. Listening to a different perspective is not necessarily easy and the longer the conflict has been brewing the more difficult it becomes to take a step back.

List Potential Solutions

While the last step will be to agree on a plan that is beneficial to everybody involved, the next step is to generate a number of options that satisfy as many interests at stake as possible. Most conflicts have more than one potential solution and the more open-minded the conflict parties are in approaching the process and the more options they create, the more likely they will find a creative solution that contributes to everybody’s well-being and success. One way to develop options is based on the Harvard Negotiation Method (Fisher et al., 1991).

Harvard Negotiation Method

Being involved in a conflict is stressful for most people and when under stress, many people resolve to focusing on solutions that have worked for them in the past. This is known as taking a stance. We revert to what has been a useful solution to this problem, historically, and we do not consider alternatives. Fisher and coworkers point out that typically this leads to bargaining over positions and the result is likely an unsatisfactory compromise. This approach is not only inefficient, as it does not lead to looking for win-win solutions and new ways to approach a problem, but also endangers relationships.

Instead of sticking to historical solutions and pitching positions against each other, the Harvard Negotiation Method suggests focusing on the underlying interests of each party involved in the conflict. Interests are the needs and desires of the individual. A position is supposed to satisfy these interests, fears, thoughts, and concerns. Getting as many of these interests on the table as possible will greatly benefit the process of finding creative solutions.

Susan’s position may be not to share a shift with Juan. She is concerned about being harassed or disrespected. Her need is to work with someone she can chat with and have a good time. Juan’s position may be that Susan is not pulling her weight. His concern may be to go home earlier when they
are done milking cows, because he is coming back for a night shift. He also may want to improve his English skills. There may be an opportunity here to improve the well-being of both of these people, beyond keeping them in separate shifts.

Based on the list of options created by focusing on the underlying interests, both parties can then agree on a plan. The plan needs to work for both sides; that is, the plan needs to have a good chance of being accomplished and not favor one party at the expense of the other. The plan needs to meet at least one, or more shared goals or needs. It should also meet one or more individual needs which are compatible with the other person’s needs. The objective of choosing the plan is to build trust, momentum, and confidence in the process of working together.

The process comes to a conclusion with outlining and agreeing on the next steps. The conflict parties need to summarize their conclusions, addressing the details. Being explicit, in terms of what will happen, when, by whom, and how the follow-up will take place, increases the probability of success. All parties involved share the responsibility of following through with the agreed on solution. This type of process creates better solutions and also increases trust and improves relationships, which often deteriorate during conflicts. On a farm, the bottom line will also benefit, because employees can concentrate on working productively and are not distracted by smoldering conflicts.

Conclusion
Conflicts are pervasive in the workplace and in employees’ and managers’ personal lives. Traditional approaches to conflicts favor a confrontational stance, which endangers relationships and leads to unsatisfactory compromise or resolution avoidance. This results in productivity losses and an unhealthy work climate. Preparing for conflict resolution with an open mind, bringing all relevant facts to the table, and developing many options that meet the interests of parties involved will increase the potential to find win-win solutions that benefit everybody in the farm.

Further Reading
Additional information on how to successfully deal with conflict and improve listening skills can be found in the following books.


For information on labor management in Michigan visit the author’s website: <http://www.msu.edu/user/bitsch>.