Conflict and Accountability in Worker Co-ops

In undemocratic workplaces, conflict is often dealt with through avoidance, separation, suspension or removal. This has become a learned default approach and is challenging to not replicate. **In worker co-ops and democratic workplaces, however, we have the opportunity to engage in generative conflict** to create deeper connectivity, uncover possibility and more inclusive communication practices.

If not prepared, resourced or committed to working through conflict, however, co-ops can often falter, struggle or fall apart around conflict. Here are some suggested systems and resources to help you be prepared for conflict in your co-op.

Before: recap previous meeting's task list in agenda

During: review tasks after each agenda item & assign point people and deadlines

The Team Meeting

After: send written recap within 24hrs & reminders in between meetings

1. Preparing for and preventing conflict:

Systems of evaluation and accountability - set them up early and practice them regularly!

a. Task Management - set up a system that clearly identifies:
    i. What is the task?
    ii. Who is responsible for the task?
    iii. When is the task due?
    iv. If tasks are not being completed, why? Does the responsible person need more information, support, or a smaller workload?
b. Use Agenda Templates.
c. Work Plans and Check-ins - make sure clear job descriptions (a useful, plain-language tool that explains the high level task areas, duties, function and responsibilities of a person's role) and work plans (for each of the person's projects: manage tasks, workflow and track the various components and milestone deadlines) are in place (and that the person responsible for doing the work is involved in work plan development).
    i. Generic work plan templates from Indeed
    ii. Sample job descriptions, work plans, and evaluation tools here from the Management Center
    iii. Succinct list of best practices
d. Many workplaces find project management tools such as Asana.com, Monday.com, or Trello.com useful for coordinating and tracking tasks. Two tools for clarifying people's roles for team projects:
    i. MOCHA - Manager Owner Consulted Helper Approver
    ii. DARCI - Decision-makers Accountable Responsible Consulted Informed

e. Performance Evaluations - how do you evaluate your workers in a way that supports them to give and receive feedback, improve their performance and grow? DAWI has created a great overview of personnel available online here. Tools/approaches such as Self Leadership Assessments, Coaching, and Courageous Conversations are some effective techniques and are detailed in the Democratic Management Guide beginning on page 67 (link). AORTA's tool for peer evaluations is here.
f. Share preferences on communication styles and preferences. Here is a tool to help, especially useful within departments or in small co-ops.
g. Discipline and Termination - in cases of harm or last resort after the above is exhausted. See grievance below.

   Resources:
   - Designing Effective Systems of Evaluation and Accountability in Worker Cooperatives
   - Accountability Toolkit with template worksheets
   - Democratic Management Guide
   - Sassy Facilitation Toolkit
   - Other Articles and Resources on Personnel on DAWI's website

2. When conflict arises:

Facilitating through generative conflict

a. Figure out the nature of the conflict. Does everyone involved understand the tension to actually be a conflict? Is there a discrepancy there? Is it a smaller miscommunication that can be cleared up in good faith, or something bigger and more complex? Is there hurt? Is this a performance issue that should involve a different set of policies or is this really fundamentally a conflict?

b. Determine if you need outside help. If it revolves around strategic decision making or differences of opinion, for example, it could be resolved by finding a good facilitator from within your team who does not have a stake in the decision being made. If a conflict is interpersonal or inseparable from organizational issues, external support is recommended. Here are some recommended facilitation collectives:
    i. Anti-Oppression Resource Training Alliance (AORTA)
    ii. The Wildfire Project
    iii. The Stoke Collective
    iv. Sassy Facilitation
    v. Peer Advisors available from USFWC's Co-op Clinic

c. Recognize and address power dynamics, especially those linked to systems of oppression. Facilitators from the collectives above are trained in this, but it is important to know that your conflicts are not happening in a vacuum and centuries of systemic oppression affects how people relate to each other. It is unlikely that you'll be able to address root causes of conflict without unpacking the power dynamics surrounding them.

d. Have members understand, have access to, and commit to following through on the conflict process your co-op has in place.

Resources on Conflict in Co-ops:
- AORTA's Communication and Conflict Resource Packet
- Video: https://institute.coop/resources/conflict-resolution

3. When we can't come to agreement:

More on grievance processes and termination

Grievances are when someone is wronged, and a process is there to address the harm done.

a. Make sure to have a grievance process before conflict arises, harm is done or accountability is needed.

b. If it comes to requiring termination, make sure you follow your co-op's termination policy / bylaws / operating agreement and document the termination thoroughly.
    A sample termination checklist can be found here.
    A sample termination process can be found here.

c. Unions can be helpful in establishing and carrying out grievance processes. Consider the Union Co-op model or consulting with a union in your industry.

Set grievance policies before conflict arises

Determine if you need external mediation

Recognize & address oppressive power dynamics

Co-op Conflict Resolution

The Co-op Clinic is here to help your business

Visit usworker.coop/clinic
Email clinic@usworker.coop to get help from cooperative peers and experts.
www.usworker.coop | Phone: 415-392-7277