



Conflict Resolution

- Potential sources of conflict
- Dealing with conflict
- Guidelines for confronting issues

1.1 Managing Conflict

Practical advice for dealing with conflict in the workplace

Why this is important

Conflict in the workplace is unpleasant and stressful for everyone on the farm. If not dealt with quickly and effectively, it can undermine staff motivation, reduce on-farm productivity and even affect your reputation as a good employer.

This fact sheet will cover:

- Potential sources of conflict
- Dealing with conflict
- Guidelines for confronting issues

Potential sources of conflict

There are many potential sources of conflict within the team environment. Some are more serious than others and a lot depends on the personalities within the team. Conflict arises when people, their ideas or beliefs clash. Within a farming context, serious conflict can come from:

- Misunderstanding or miscommunication
- Dishonesty
- Negligence
- Bullying (verbal and physical)
- Personality clashes
- Religious and cultural differences (differences in beliefs)
- Favouritism
- Differences in opinion over how things should be done.

Dealing with conflict

Ignoring conflict, hoping it will disappear with time, is extremely destructive because it creates tension, stress and ill-feeling. Often conflict that is not addressed will fester until a crisis point is reached. This is often too late and may result in the loss of a key employee, or manifest in unpleasant counterproductive behaviours.

The first thing to do when conflict develops is to treat it seriously. Listen to the complaint and try to identify the key points. It may help to repeat these back to those complaining, in order to ensure that you have understood them correctly.

If another person or group is involved, talk to them as soon as possible. Be objective (i.e. don't pre-judge the issue) and try to get their side of the story.

If the source of the conflict is you, e.g. the team disagree with the way you do things, try not to take it personally. Try to treat the situation as you would any other conflict. Treat it as a task that needs to be completed.

Once you have the facts, you can decide what to do. Options include:

- Getting the various parties together to discuss the issue and find a way forward with you as a mediator
- Using a professional mediator to resolve the issue (third party)
- Disciplinary action.

The first aim of any conflict resolution process should be to encourage open discussion between the people involved, without allowing it to become personal. Only when each party understands the position of the other will it be possible to find a solution. This requires great patience on your part, especially when dealing with people's beliefs.

Don't expect to identify a completely acceptable solution first time around. Often the process towards successful conflict resolution involves negotiating a way forward and compromise on both sides. Having an agreed plan in place which is regularly updated can be a good place to start.

In some cases, such as where personal violence or repeat offences are concerned, there may be no option but to take disciplinary action. In these cases, you should follow a clearly defined process. In cases where staff are dismissed as a result of conflict, it is a good idea to seek professional legal advice before (or as soon as possible after) making the decision to dismiss.

Keep a record of the complaint, the date it was raised, the key points on both sides and the action taken. Give copies to all parties involved. Records are especially important in cases which lead to disciplinary action or dismissal.

Of course, it is better to avoid conflict in the first place rather than to have to deal with it. Encourage an open-door policy on farm where staff feel comfortable letting you know about issues as they arise. It may also be helpful to become part of an employee assistance programme where staff can seek independent support on issues.

Guidelines for confronting issues

1.	Keep the communication going at all times – rather than just when issues arise
2.	Stick to the issue concerned – don't get sidetracked by other non-relevant issues. Deal with one thing at a time – don't get caught up in feelings, emotions or personal issues
3.	Be positive and have the desire to resolve the issue
4.	Stick to the present – don't drag in historical issues
5.	Be honest
6.	Acknowledge your error – if you are wrong admit it
7.	End positively – put the issue in perspective, emphasise the positive aspects of your relationship.

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