



Conflict Management Program

Overview

The Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity (ODEO) is embarking on an innovative Agency-wide effort, the Conflict Management Program (CMP). The CMP is designed to assist the Agency in managing institutional risk to mission success by providing managers, supervisors, and employees with effective tools to more strategically address workplace conflicts and resolve them without third-party intervention, reducing the need for employees to access formal processes, such as the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaints process. The risk management benefits of the CMP include minimizing the financial impact of EEO complaints processing, and maximizing workplace productivity and morale by enabling employees to focus on the mission of their organization without the prolonged and costly distractions created by unresolved workplace conflict.

During FY 07, ODEO deployed a successful pilot of the program at three NASA Centers: Glenn Research Center (GRC), Johnson Space Center (JSC), and Marshall Space Flight Center (MSFC). Managers and employee participants in the basic conflict management course delivered at the pilot Centers reported that the training provided useful tools and techniques for working more collaboratively with team members, building trust, and more effectively communicating with co-workers and managers.

This overview describes in detail what the CMP is, why ODEO believes it is needed at this time, what the expected outcomes are, and how the CMP will proceed.

What is the Conflict Management Program?

The CMP is a comprehensive Agency-wide program to more effectively manage workplace conflict through:

- *Center-by-Center needs assessment of issues around workplace conflict; and*
- *Training for managers, supervisors, and employees to develop communication, trust building, collaborative problem solving, and conflict resolution skills; and*
- *Training for ADR/EEO teams to address and resolve disputes at an early stage.*

To assist in carrying out these efforts, ODEO has formed an Agency CMP Advisory Team including representatives from the Office of General Counsel, the Office of Human Capital Management, the Office of Public Affairs, and two Center EO Offices.

Why a Conflict Management Program?

The demands on NASA's workforce are changing as the Agency launches a new era in space exploration. Skills, competencies and capabilities necessary to execute the Agency's new vision for space exploration are now being realigned to address the transition from the Space Shuttle Program to the Constellation Program. This transition period is expected to place heightened levels of stress and strain on the NASA workforce and increase the potential for conflict in organizations across the Agency. This, in turn, may detract from the overall health of each Center, and its ability to achieve the optimum efficiency needed for mission success.

Aside from the implications of the transition, NASA has long grappled with systemic problems regarding employees' level of trust in upper management, employees' willingness and comfort level with voicing unpopular opinions and raising concerns up the chain of command, and employees' fears of reprisal if they do so. The NASA Chief Historian's 2007 Survey was the latest in a long line of reports to find these issues remain significant concerns for the Agency. In addition, a 2007 Merit Systems Promotion Board (MSPB) report, based on MSPB's Merit Principles survey, found that more than half of NASA respondents reported that they did not believe the Agency responds constructively to resolve workplace conflict.

At NASA as at any organization, workplace conflicts that remain unresolved are known to negatively affect individual and group productivity, decision making, team building, and employee retention. Conflicts that remain unresolved over a period of time can become more personal, interfere more with valuable work relationships, polarize critical teams, create absenteeism, and in many instances lead to grievances, complaints and sometimes even legal actions. This amounts to a huge investment of time and resources expended on addressing and resolving conflict that needn't have occurred in the first place.

The CMP will enable NASA to focus as an Agency on addressing these longstanding problems and concerns, which are directly related to workplace conflict, especially conflict that results from lack of trust and ineffective communication laterally and vertically. The CMP is uniquely positioned to address these critical workforce environment issues in a Center-by-Center fashion. The CMP Pilot has already demonstrated this. In addition, the financial savings from reduced turnover and absenteeism rates and the benefit of retaining the knowledge and skills of experienced workers and managers more than justify the cost of CMP.

Finally, but no less importantly, there are decision making benefits to handling conflicts constructively that CMP can help to provide. For instance, more diverse inputs are likely to be considered and incorporated into better, more innovative decisions and technical solutions. Decision makers are likely to get more candid feedback from key employees on the results of decisions in time to take appropriate corrective action, if needed.

What are the Expected Outcomes of the CMP?

The expected outcomes of the CMP include:

- *A new model for addressing workplace conflict, reducing use of formal processes, e.g., EEO;*
- *Development of communication and conflict resolution skills;*
- *Expanded use of resolution skills to prevent and manage conflict, with benefits beyond EEO;*
- *An improved environment in which employees feel they may safely raise concerns;*
- *More efficient use of human and financial resources;*
- *Strengthened partnerships among EEO, HR, legal and other stakeholders; and*
- *More frequent and effective use of ADR processes as a means of resolution when third-party intervention becomes necessary.*

What are the Next Steps?

The CMP began in the first quarter of FY 2008. Specific milestones in the development and deployment of the CMP include:

- ❖ *Briefing to Center CMP Leadership*
ODEO will provide information on the purposes, scope, and intended outcomes of the initiative to each Center's senior leadership.
- ❖ *Identification of a Center CMP Team*
It is envisioned that the CMP team at each Center will be led by a senior management official from the Center Director's Office. The team will include representatives from the offices of key stakeholders, e.g., EO, HR (Training and Labor Relations), Chief Counsel, Public Affairs. The Center CMP team will collaborate with the ODEO's Agency CMP Advisory Team, interface with the vendor, and coordinate communications and logistical matters.
- ❖ *CMP Needs Assessment and Analysis*
The Needs Assessment at each Center will include interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., EO, HR, Chief Counsel's Office), focus groups, and data and document analysis. The assessment will enable ODEO and its vendor to tailor implementation of the CMP to each Center's needs.

- ❖ *Communications Plan Rollout*
The communications rollout will include print and electronic dissemination of information on the CMP to all employees. The ODEO will work in conjunction with each Center's CMP Team on these efforts. The communications rollout will occur in phases.
- ❖ *Deployment of Training*
The deployment phase of the CMP will include: a basic conflict management training module for managers and supervisors as well as employees; training on the EEO ADR process for those involved in managing and implementing the EEO ADR program; and training for the EEO ADR team.
- ❖ *Evaluation and Impact Study*
The CMP training at each Center will be evaluated based on course evaluations. In addition, an Impact Study will look at how course participants have been able to apply the knowledge and skills gained from the training in the workplace.
- ❖ *Institutionalization of CMP*
Once the training has been provided to all Centers, it will be offered on an as-needed basis, e.g., new employee orientation. ODEO will also explore, for future purposes, conflict management coaching, web-based conflict management refresher training, advanced conflict management training, and conflict management training for new managers and supervisors.

Conclusion

With the full participation of each NASA Center, ODEO is confident that the CMP, once institutionalized, has the potential to be a truly transformational journey for the Agency, with positive outcomes for conflict resolution well beyond the EEO context. The CMP offers a unique opportunity to help the Agency maintain its focus on mission success as we move closer to realizing the initial objectives of the U.S. Vision for Space Exploration.