

Restorative Practices

An alternative model for resolving staff conflict

BY JENNIFER CRAIN

Before the Olympia Food Co-op became a two-store operation with over 80 staff members, resolving internal conflicts was a direct but mostly informal process. If a conflict arose, such as an abrasive interaction, lateness or worker negligence, any staff member of the consensus-run collective could give direct feedback to the offending co-worker, either face-to-face or in an evaluation.

But when staff numbers climbed, they found that the informal process was no longer sufficient, and follow-through on consequences was a problem. Eventually, the co-op decided to revamp its staff accountability policies, including the adoption of restorative practices.

Restorative practices provide a framework for supporting positive staff relationships, including a system for addressing conflicts when they arise. They challenge standard responses to conflict, namely those that are punitive, neglectful, or permissive. Dr. Paul McCold, adjunct professor of restorative justice at Simon Fraser University and St. Martin's University, says a restorative model favors an inclusive approach that "actively encourages the involvement of the relational community."

Conferencing to address conflict

When a conflict arises, it can be addressed during a direct interaction that may be called a restorative dialogue, restorative circle or restorative conference. Though terminology varies, the method is the same: facilitated, face-to-face meetings involving the wrongdoer, the injured party and members of an affected community.

Amos Clifford, executive director of the Center for Restorative Process, a California-based organization that specializes in community building, says a restorative conference is "an intentional conversation that includes those involved in a conflict and a trained facilitator." Anyone affected by a harmful action can be invited to participate.

Prior to a conference, the facilitator meets individually with those involved in the conflict to be sure each person understands the process and is opting in voluntarily. Facilitators "help participants come to a shared understanding of the event and its consequences," says Clifford, "and to agree upon actions toward making



ILLUSTRATION BY TJASA ŽURGA

things right."

Rather than focusing on punishment, the person who has caused harm is encouraged to take responsibility and given support to decrease the likelihood of repeating harmful actions in the future. The system is flexible, depending on the group and the severity of the offense. All conference participants decide together on a list of "agreements," which can include any action that will help foster accountability—for example, an apology, scheduling changes, a period of probation, or even voluntary termination.

"The facilitator," says Clifford, "will help to clarify what agreements were made and how accountability for their completion will be handled."

Restorative conferencing at work

Restorative justice, the model at the root of restorative practices, has been used most widely to address conflicts in the criminal justice system and in school systems. Research indicates

restorative methods of resolving conflict result in high participant satisfaction rates and lowered recidivism rates.

Since restorative practices are organized around the belief that wrongdoing harms an individual or community rather than a state or institution, the model can be applied in almost any social system, including places of business. Maeanna Welti, Olympia Food Co-op's deli manager and collective facilitator, writes, "We want ways of addressing accountability issues that are supportive of everyone involved, including those who need to be accountable."

Clifford recounts an incident between two supervisors that was touched off when one made a disparaging comment about the other in front of a group of employees in the break room. When word reached the other supervisor through a friend who had been present when the remark was made, a "gossip war" escalated to the point of harming workplace morale. The two supervisors and the employee's friend were invited to a restorative conference. "The

incident was discussed, apologies were made, and together the two supervisors acknowledged some of the sources of misunderstanding and conflict that existed between them. They agreed to work together to improve communication,” he says. After a few months, the two reported they were continuing to work together respectfully and without further incident.

Dr. McCold and Beth Rodman, both of the Thurston County Restorative Justice Initiative, recall a more serious incident involving an employee who embezzled money from the company where she'd worked for over two decades. Though the employee was terminated, the company still held a restorative conference where the group settled on a repayment schedule so the employee could return what she had stolen. The company did not take further legal action. Most important, say McCold and Rodman, during the conference, fellow co-workers had a chance to openly process and heal. “That’s what restorative practices are very interested in. We have to deal with the aftermath,” says McCold, “to deal with the disruption in relationships.”

Team-building to minimize future conflict

Conference facilitators and participants are guided by a list of principles, says Rodman, who currently works as a restorative consultant. These may include (but are not limited to) respect, inclusiveness, empowerment, care, high expectations, and valuing process over outcomes.

“All of these things that sound so simple and easy,” she says, but “they’re not easy to do five days a week with a group of human beings. So they’ve got to be held up and promoted regularly.”

Rodman is referring to another aspect of restorative practices: team-building and attention to daily details. An organization embracing restorative practices adopts more than a protocol for addressing conflict. They create a framework for supporting positive staff relationships to minimize the possibility of future conflict.

In one of her former organizations, Rodman says the staff devoted two hours each month to team-building and, as a supervisor, she met at regular intervals with supervisees to talk about what was going well, what could be going better, and to set goals for future meetings. The Olympia Food Co-op does team-building in smaller groups and offers additional trainings on an as-needed basis.

Trainings and regular team-building help facilitate an ongoing attitude of respect, honest feedback and attention to detail that McCold says make up the backbone of restorative practices, “If you deal with the small things, the big ones never happen.”

Clifford agrees, “So much about creating community in cultures is about doing it proactively and well,” he says. “If we do this, conflicts become much easier to deal with.”

Adopting restorative practices

In Olympia, a restructuring committee did the work of a management team, developing a new process for accountability that was later discussed and approved collectively by staff members. Welti says they decided to include restorative practices in their policies because they meet the co-op’s criteria of using a compassionate system that includes real consequences.

“For us,” says Welti, “it is also the most natural fit for a crucial area that frequently gets overlooked in hierarchical workplaces: the cross-over between interpersonal conflict and work performance.”

But top-down work structures can also benefit from the system. Adopting a restorative model creates a structure for dealing with conflicts, as well as for an open and engaged workplace culture.

“You need the system,” says Clifford, “and what that system is called is community.”

Food co-ops can take steps to adopt restorative practices first by creating or identifying traditions that cement positive relationships. These can range from a large celebration, such as a harvest festival, to a symbolic object that’s displayed during staff meetings. Any practice or event that

brings staff members together, links the vision of the co-op to the every-day workplace, and fosters curiosity can be viewed as a tool for creating positive staff interactions.

Second, co-ops can seek outside training or consultation to adopt a restorative workplace structure. McCold and Rodman suggest that authority figures in a workplace receive facilitator training and that the staff be engaged in continuing team-building efforts. Co-ops also may consider frequent check-ins, as a staff or in one-on-one meetings, and brush-up training for facilitators.

Embracing a restorative model provides an infrastructure that encourages positive, transparent communication, open interactions among staff, and a tangible, flexible system for resolving conflict in a way that promotes healing and appropriate consequences for everyone involved. ■

Links

Restorative Justice Online: www.restorativejustice.org

International Institute for Restorative Practices: www.iirp.edu

Center for Restorative Process: www.centerforrestorativeprocess.com

The Centre for Restorative Justice: www.sfu.ca/cfrj/about.html

Restorative Resources: restorativeresources.org/Training.html

Further reading

“Retributive Justice, Restorative Justice.” *New Perspectives on Crime and Justice* (Issue #4). Akron, Pa.: Mennonite Central Committee Office of Criminal Justice, September, 16 pages, 1985.

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