

Book Review for ACResolution

Emerging Systems for Managing Workplace Conflict: Lessons from American Corporations for Managers and Dispute Resolution Professionals

by David B. Lipsky, Ronald L. Seeber, and Richard D. Fincher
Jossey-Bass, 2003, 406 pages,

Conflict has been described as a growth industry, and conflict resolution often touted as an all-but-inevitable wave of the future. Naturally, those who have chosen to work in the field believe its insights and techniques should be spreading rapidly. And we are happy to see indicators of steady growth: more courses, more books, more programs, and more cases. But in the back of our minds may lurk a fear: is this field really here to stay or is it likely to be overwhelmed by larger forces, a relatively short-lived obsession of a passionate, but ultimately small, group of dreamers?

Empirical studies on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) from which broad conclusions can be drawn have been rare. That is why *Emerging Systems for Managing Workplace Conflict* is such an important book. It provides objective, systematically gathered, evidence of how ADR is actually being used by a broad spectrum of American corporations and public agencies. It also puts the information into its historical context. And it offers considerable practical advice about how corporations and public agencies can develop workplace conflict management systems tailored to their unique missions and needs.

The authors are distinguished professors and practitioners with extensive experience in workplace issues. They draw upon four separate, but interrelated research efforts going back to 1997. The first was a mail and telephone survey of the general counsel or chief litigators of Fortune 1000 companies. The authors completed interviews with 606, a very high response rate. Follow-up interviews were later conducted with about fifty organizations to explore more detailed hypotheses suggested by the initial survey. The authors also surveyed the active membership of the National Academy of Arbitrators and drew upon research, case studies, and secondary materials published by many other academics in writing the book.

The book is organized into three parts. The first presents an overview of the reasons why many corporations and public agencies chose to move away from traditional forms of dispute resolution and labor relations to develop more flexible, proactive, and responsive conflict management systems. The authors briefly trace the evolution of the workplace social contract and the forces of change that have caused its transformation during the 1900s. They also describe the rise of the ADR movement and the emergence of new strategies for managing conflict, grouping firms under three headings by the kinds of strategies used (contend, settle, and prevent).

Part two focuses on the establishment of conflict management systems, describing the design of both internal and external features and discussing how systems may be implemented and evaluated. This section is packed with practical advice for corporate managers, human resources professionals, system designers, and dispute resolution providers.

Part three offers observations about the future of conflict management systems, listing the barriers to their growth and describing likely trends in the field. The book also contains two helpful appendices: a listing of the corporations and other organizations studied and a glossary of terms. Each chapter is copiously footnoted, and an extensive list of references is provided, for those interested in further information.

Emerging Systems for Managing Workplace Conflict deserves to be widely read. It is a rich store of information for organizational leaders interested in improving the effectiveness of their organizations and reducing the costs of conflict. And it is equally valuable for those working in conflict resolution. Who among us would not want to know more about our field's current customers and likely future?

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