

What Price Workplace Conflict? Injuring the Bottom Line

By Virginia Swain

Published in the Worcester Business Journal, October 30, 2006

Conflict is inevitable in a human workplace. Challenging one another's ideas can strengthen an outcome. But when co-workers cannot respect different approaches, everyone suffers. Left unresolved, conflicts inevitably escalate. Emotionally, the work environment grows more toxic. Financially, the toll can be catastrophic.

One case study recently quantified the cost of a physician-nurse dispute that dragged out for two weeks. Wasted time and energy, reduced decision quality, additional health costs, lowered motivation, and an office restructuring after several employees quit, brought the cost to \$61,000. Too often, managers do not consider conflict's bottom-line impact.

How can we equip today's workforce to manage conflict before it flares out of control? While conflict itself is a healthy expression of differences, our reactions to conflict may be unhealthy and often disrespectful.

I train people to develop conflict management skills as they become Reflective Leaders – self-aware people who have strong listening and empathic skills in the workplace. Key to their newfound understanding is how they – and others – process information. How can you share ideas and implement change if you are not understood?

Missteps are all too easy. To avoid them, there are many models to facilitate effective understanding of different styles of interaction. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is one such personality assessment tool. It informs people in how to meet challenges and make decisions differently. Knowing one's preferences facilitates both the acceptance of diverse perspectives, and appreciation of the need for many viewpoints.

Successful teams welcome each preference: Do they speak as they think, or remain quiet until they have finished thinking? Are they interested in facts or abstract ideas? Are their decisions logical or relationship-based? How rigidly do they stick to their plans?

Reflective Leadership training includes remembering strengths we take for granted. Digging below our lives' busy surface enables us to refocus on our core values, principles, and innate skills, renewing our sense of purpose and confidence in resolving professional conflicts.

Equipped with new insights, Reflective Leaders also learn to mediate and transform stressful situations, reducing conflict intensity from high, what management consultant Speed Leas calls "intractable" – opposing parties prepared for annihilation and the courts - to a manageable "problem to solve" or "disagreement." Conflict resolution styles

range from persuasion, collaboration, and support to avoidance (picking your battles), negotiation and, although very alienating, compulsion - forcing the issue without input from the other party.

Conflict management starts with behavior that values others - employees, vendors and especially customers. If you communicate with genuine caring and active listening, people who feel they have been heard stand ready to cooperate and solve problems. Address problems, not people, and the focus remains on the immediate problem. Use descriptive rather than judgmental words, and you can discuss issues without provoking defensiveness or overreactions.

Avoid devaluing behaviors, which include sarcasm, intimidation, moralizing, absolutism, interrupting or obviously not listening. These approaches spark feelings of helplessness and rage, as well as rebellion, blocked creativity, and silence, which does not lead to productive problem-solving.

Over time, Reflective Leaders create conditions of respect and tolerance in the workplace to encourage their co-workers' best efforts and empower them to address their shortcomings. They elicit a shared vision and mission from the group, rather than impose their own to maximize buy-in. Through their introspection and training, they find a balance between a fulfilling personal and professional life.

"In the workplace, we haven't learned how to deal with conflicts," comments a client, Krista Conlon, a small company business analyst. "I learned how to be a good listener, be a facilitator, and let people's needs be heard. But I never realized how my personal changes could alter the dynamic at work. The people I work with can model these principles too."

There are many healthy ways to manage conflict. We may learn that some approaches come quite easily. Becoming conscious of those innate skills affirms our natural abilities. Learning new styles of conflict resolution increases the possibility of a peaceful workplace.

As a specialist in leadership, conflict, team building and change management, Virginia Swain, Director, Institute for Global Leadership (www.global-leader.org), consulted on the Thomas Cook/American Express merger as well as many other change implementations.

Reprinted with Permission, Worcester Business Journal