



CONFLICTS IN THE WORKPLACE: A PROBLEM WITH SOLUTIONS **by Susan T. Daniel***

Your two top managers disagree about whether design or manufacturing is the key to continued success; accounts payable and accounts receivable are each blaming the other for failure to close the books on time; your engineering team is not functioning up to its potential because team members dislike one another. Without doubt, one of the most productivity-draining realities of modern business - conflicts and disputes - are incredibly time consuming and can cause major frustration for managers and executives. These conflicts can arise between managers and employees, employees and other employees and customers/vendors and employees. Left unaddressed, these disputes sap employee energy and morale and frequently cause competitive disadvantage, unwanted turnover, demoralization, absenteeism, legal fees and workers' compensation costs.

The Theoretical Basis

Much research has been conducted over the last thirty years regarding conflicts and how they affect the workplace.¹ This research has divided conflicts into two categories: task conflicts (which are defined as "differences in opinion relating to work or business decisions"²) and relationship conflicts (which are defined as "personality differences and interpersonal tensions"³). What researchers have come to realize is that these two categories frequently cannot be separated, and that the so-called "cool topics,"⁴ the task conflicts, while more rational and fact-based, become permeated with relationship issues.

Relationship conflicts or "hot conflicts" often are based on differences in strongly held belief systems, values and interests. Three clear indications that conflicts are "hot" are:

"Team members [who] persist in arguing the same points.

When the team reaches impasses, talks get personal. Accusations may be spoken out loud, and members may speculate privately about one another's motives.

Once negative attributions take hold, emotions flare and progress halts."⁵

Further, research demonstrates that people "attribute unflattering motives, traits, or abilities to those that disagree - and persist in disagreeing- with [others'] strongly held views."⁶

Teams and individuals who are able to engage in constructive discussion about relationship conflicts ("hot conflicts") are better able to deal with their issues than those that ignore or attempt to bury them. The reason for this is that even if the conflicts are not voiced, they seep out in meetings in body language (eye-rolling, lack of eye contact, crossed arms, etc.) and in verbal statements (tone of voice, oblique criticism, etc.). In turn, the other party picks

up on these signals and interprets and responds to them causing a cycle of unstated negativism. This negativism can spiral downward until it causes a major disruption or it can fester over time leading to dysfunctional or under-producing teams.

A Case Study

Let's take the example of the Vertigo Company (fictitious name), a manufacturer of ladders. Business has fallen off recently and the upper management team (the CEO and 7 people) meet to come up with ideas to revitalize the Company. At the meeting Tom, the head of manufacturing, explains that the issue is one of design. Vertigo is not making innovative or stylish ladders and he has the data to prove it. He explains that their competitor, Lofty Ladders, is doing very well and has introduced a line of color-coded, sleek ladders. Sandy, the head of design, counters, stating that she has data which shows that public perception is that Vertigo's ladders are poorly made and unstable. Sandy says her departments designs are fine but manufacturing is cutting corners and not producing a quality product. The "data wars" begin and the conversation deteriorates quickly. Tom states again that it is lack of good designs, that there have been no new ideas from Design "since the Carter administration" and that the Company needs new blood. Sally retorts that manufacturing "couldn't find it's way out of a paper bag," and that there needs to be an investigation of the shortcuts taken by manufacturing. At this point Trudy, the CEO, halts the meeting. Recognizing the need for outside help she calls in a conflict resolution consultant to help resolve the issues and get Vertigo moving in the right direction.

What can a consultant or disinterested third-party do?

The first thing the consultant did after speaking at length with Trudy, and getting a complete picture of the situation from her perspective, was to separately interview Tom and Sandy who both staunchly defend their positions. He also spoke with members of both departments and the head of Sales and Marketing **(1. Interviewing the key parties)** who were at the senior management meeting. He learned that Vertigo's sales had been decreasing each year over the last five years; that there had been a small number of complaints about workmanship and that Lofty had recently come out with some innovative designs **(2. Assessing the problem – both historically and in its current situation).**

He found out that Trudy had not raised these issues with either Tom or Sandy prior to the senior management meeting and had not said anything to them at the meeting. The consultant arranged to first sit down with Trudy and help her understand how she had dropped the ball **(3. Coaching managers on how to have difficult conversations and deal with difficult people).** He held a feedback meeting with Trudy, Tom and Sandy. **(4. Feedback)** He then recommended, based on his interviews, that both groups work to revive trust in the other group. **(5. Training groups to rebuild trust and communication).** In time, both groups recognized the key role played by the other group. Tom improved quality control and a committee of executive team members (including Tom) headed by Sandy, drew up a three-year plan for designing and manufacturing two new, highly competitive ladders. The Design and Manufacturing groups met periodically (initially with outside facilitation and then self-facilitated) to be sure they were on the same track **(6.**

Training groups on conflict avoidance). The Consultant continued to coach Trudy on an as-needed basis especially around dealing directly with difficult issues and people.**(7. Individual coaching, if needed).**

¹ A. Edmondson and D. Smith, "To Hot To Handle? How To Manage Relationship Conflict", *California Management Review*, Vol.49, No.1 (Fall 2006): 6

² A. Edmondson and D. Smith, *op. cit.*

³ A. Edmondson and D. Smith, *op. cit.*

⁴ A. Edmondson and D. Smith, *op. cit.*: 7

⁵ "New Conflict Management Skills," www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/business-negotiations/new-conflict-management-skills/

⁶ A. Edmondson and D. Smith, *op. cit.*: 7

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