

Everyone deserves a respectful workplace

The Dance of conflict (Part 1)

Are you involved in a personality conflict with someone at work? Have you ever been? Are you trying unsuccessfully to solve a personality conflict in your workplace? Almost all of us at one time or another could answer 'yes' to one or more of these questions.

For over 30 years I've worked with organizations, managers and individuals concerning conflict in the workplace, and all that naturally flows from unresolved conflict, like harassment and discrimination complaints. I often hear from managers and organizations looking for solutions for personality conflicts at work. It is an age old problem and of course the opportunity for a personality conflict to blossom is created when we put people together from diverse backgrounds, different ages, holding opposing beliefs or incompatible work ethics and expect them to work productively together. Today, more than in the past, generational gaps between workers can impact interpersonal behaviours – where a new employee and a long-term employee butt heads over workplace procedures.

There are as many reasons why personality conflicts happen as there are people in the workplace. Almost always the personality conflict involves two people. Sometimes there can be more folks involved, but they tend to be more on the peripheral. The two people involved, (let's call them disputants) are stressed out from working with each other. What they fail to recognize is that their behaviour, as they participate in the dance of conflict, (subtly and not so subtly), negatively impacts the working environment for others in their workplace. Often people who work in an area with two disputants are more stressed than the disputants.

The disputants are of the opinion that the other person is the bane of their existence – they are in the workplace to make their life miserable. The stress of facing an enemy every day, being focused on that enemy, having to watch your back so the enemy

doesn't attack are all stress producing factors that govern the day-to-day interactions of the disputants. Complaints to management occur almost daily about the other person. Often management's suggestions, like don't talk to the other person, are not met with enthusiasm or a belief that the suggestion will work. After a period of time feelings of hopelessness arise – once again stress producing. Time off work begins to occur as each disputant awakens to days of just not feeling up to the challenge of more stress from that 'enemy'. Lack of respect for management solutions begins to erode the disputant's thinking and through that all – the conflict festers.

I offer Intervention Services to organizations and individuals for all kinds of interpersonal reasons, including conflict. When I meet with disputants and learn about their 'personality conflict' I hear a variety of rationalizations as to why they choose to behave in the manner they are in the workplace. I recall one situation where one of the disputants, Martha said that the reason she didn't greet Sally (the other disputant) in the morning was that when Sally said 'Good morning' to her it ruined her day. Her rationale was, how can she say 'good morning' when it clearly was not a *good* morning because her 'enemy' was speaking to her! In another situation two disputants who worked together for years (George and Emily) had reached such momentum in their conflict that they were not speaking. Emily was totally convinced that everything George did was deliberately done to provoke her. George was a man who had a way of breathing that was heavy and rattling. Emily knew he was breathing that way to annoy her! When she learned that George actually had sinus and adenoid issues, the real reason why his breathing was so laboured, she was astonished.

The disputants usually are blinded to their own behaviours and instead focus almost exclusively – and sometimes excessively – on the other person's behaviour. Everything the 'other' does annoys, irritates or angers them. Disputants have an inner dialogue going on – one that runs off of perceptions about what the 'other' is doing – making up perceptions as they ponder an insult or misdeed. This inner dialogue allows the dispute to grow and grow and helps to rationalize behaviour or reactions. This inner dialogue allows each to blame the other for their own emotional wellness, their own

behaviours. Disputants are hooked into the battle. They are immersed in ego – believing everything is about ‘me’ and how the other person impacts ‘me’. Insults are easy to run with. Seeing negative behaviour when there may be none is an easy way of looking at the ‘other’. It is extremely difficult for the disputants, at this point, to exit the conflict dance without assistance.

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