

Everyone deserves a respectful workplace

The Dance of Conflict – Part Two

Employers grapple with what to do with the disputants in a personality conflict situation. Often managers will separate the disputants with the hope that the personality conflict will end. It usually doesn't. In fact often the separation simply spreads the impact of the personality conflict to others who had not been directly impacted. I've found it rarely is a good management practice to try to transfer the problems away.

Disputants complain to managers about each other on a regular basis. This pattern of complaints builds to a crescendo and some form of crisis results. At that point the manager will call the two disputants in to discuss the situation and typically try to obtain some closure and some commitment from the disputants to work together. Everyone promises to work together. Managers might even suggest the disputants only talk to each other over work-related issues and otherwise avoid each other. Sometimes it's suggested that they don't talk to each other at all. Every one parts ways from the meeting with the intention (outwardly at least) to have closure with the conflict. Silence reigns for a while – complaints ground to a halt. Ahh, it worked! But wait, one day sad to say, one of the disputants comes in to talk to the manager and complains about the other disputant. Soon the other disputant comes in to complain. Within a few weeks or months the pattern of complaints builds to a crescendo and another crisis occurs. The dialogue between manager and disputants repeats itself. Meanwhile the personality conflict grows and festers. The manager wonders why this doesn't seem to work. The disputants say they want to get along – why aren't they? What the manager often fails to consider is that something about the personality conflict situation is feeding the disputants and meeting their egoic needs. What this means is – the disputants don't want to end their conflict. They may 'say' they do, but *their actions don't match their words*. Something about the conflict is feeding them and they don't want to give it up. So regardless of how much the manager wants to help to break the conflict dance s/he can't do so. Why? Because the disputants don't want to stop dancing the dance.

I remember one case that I was involved with – at the investigation end of the conflict – (it had gone on so long unresolved that finally a harassment complaint had been filed) and I was investigating the complaint. The issue started with a personality conflict between James and Heather. The two disputants, now the complainant (Heather) and the respondent (James), both tried to convince me s/he was the bigger victim and so had been harassed by the 'other'. The sad thing is – neither wanted to be involved in a harassment investigation – yet there they were because their personality conflict went unresolved for so long that in desperation Heather filed a harassment complaint. My experience across Canada supports this finding – that unresolved conflicts often end up as formal harassment or discrimination complaints.

The unresolved personality conflict builds and festers creating what is referred to as a hostile working environment for co-workers and often for the manager too. Something has to be done – but what? An employer is responsible under the law to provide a working environment that is free of harassment and discrimination – a safe environment.

The manager decides to meet with the disputants again and to threaten job action if they don't stop their negative behaviours. That doesn't work either! The disputants often respond to threats with time off work 'due to stress'. Truly, the threat of job action can increase feelings of stress so who is to say that's not so. Meanwhile, the manager really doesn't want to take job action or that would have happened long ago – and at some level the disputants know that.

The manager instructs the disputants to address all communication to each other – through him/her. While that may mean that more work happens with less time actively watching the other for intended insults, the manager has now created more work and more worry for himself/herself and leaves one with these questions.... how is this helping? ... who is taking responsibility for the conflict?

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