

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

Volume 5 Issue 1



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The Conflict Resolver

Negotiating among Workplace Dictators

"You wouldn't negotiate with Hitler, would you?" was Michelle's response to my invitation to help her address some long brewing workplace disagreements with her supervisor, Kaylie. Michelle was equating her colleague - a woman with management responsibilities, a loving family and friends - with Adolf Hitler. I'll give you a moment to marvel at Michelle's talent for hyperbole.

Then I'll invite you to reflect. Think about employees in conflict in your organization and how they tend to vilify the other person. This demonizing arises naturally from the fact that people in conflict seldom treat each other well. The typical pattern of action and reaction often leads to a belief that each side is out to harm the other. It's not much of a leap from there to believe that the "harmer" is a thoroughly malicious human being.

This narrow view of the other side is compounded by the way feuding employees seek affirmation of their opinions. Rather than talking to those people who might disabuse them of their negative impressions (e.g. Kaylie's close associates and friends) they grumble to people most likely to agree with them. As a result, their complaints become amplified in an echo chamber of sympathy and agreement. The echo they hear most is, "Wow she must really be awful to treat you that way." The complainer's blamelessness ascends while the

image of the adversary devolves further in to someone really unsavory... perhaps even a little Joseph Stalin. As an organizational leader, here's where you come in.

Let's assume this employee conflict is like 95 percent of the ones people in organizational life experience. There are different perspectives held by basically good, sensible people (no Pol Pots here). In cases like this your responsibility is to interrupt the negative echoes. Here are five measures you can use to restore perspective.

Understand vilification: A key reason people demonize the other side is to justify their own attitudes and actions. It's permissible to be nasty if we believe our opponent is Benito Mussolini.

Don't amplify the echo: Consciously stay above the fray by listening in an empathetic, but neutral, manner. Refuse to add your voice to the negative critique of the other side.

Defang it by normalizing it: Highlight the simple truth that people treat each other poorly when they're in fierce conflict. It's more a statement about the

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Training Offer

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Equips employees with mindsets and skills to deal with inevitable, everyday people problems throughout your workplace.

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We Fix Workplace Conflict

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Fix Our Conflict

When the relationship between leaders sours, your entire organization suffers. Perhaps you hoped they'd work it out themselves or you tried a sit down chat on your own. But they still struggle to communicate and work together. Their



Training and Skill Development

If your organization is like most, managers spend much of their time dealing with staff personality conflicts and many employees inevitably bump up against coworkers. Perhaps it's time to consider training to improve skills and abilities to overcome



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nature of conflict than an indictment of the character of the other person.

Highlight the personal cost: Help each side see the corrosive effect of demonizing the other person. As a client recently shared with me, "Over the course of this fight I've become a person I never intended to be." It's been said that anger does more harm to the vessel in which it's stored than the object on which it's poured.

Advocate direct dialogue: Encourage discussion and negotiation between the opponents. There's no better way to change the script from "he's evil" to "he has a legitimate point of view" than through skillfully facilitated, face to face conversation.

Leaders like you can't add your weight to either side of a workplace conflict and expect your partisanship to foster resolution. It's healthier and more productive to help people see each other, as well as their own role, more objectively. So, the next time an employee compares a coworker to a despotic megalomaniac, you'll know it's time to encourage some perspective.

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Perspective

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in our galaxy.