THE CONFLICT EXTINGUISHER

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

911 for Hot Solutions for Workplace Discord

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The Conflict Resolver

Tools to Use When Peace Comes to Shove

The infamous meeting all those months ago teetered on the brink of actual violence. First there was the vigorous policy discussion, then the increasingly virulent disagreement that contributed to the misinterpretation of a raised clipboard and, finally, the blocking motion with an arm… or was that a shove? Regardless of what happened, there was the icy aftermath affecting both relationships and productivity.

While few workplace conflicts get physical, the question of how to find a way back to civility after a flare-up is always there. Here are four techniques I use in workplace resolution sessions to bring employees to an accord. You can try them sequentially until one succeeds, as I did in the case I'm referencing, or use them interchangeably.

1. Small insight, larger consequences: "What *other* explanations might there be for why he raised his clipboard?" Perspective questions such as these can help someone imagine alternatives to their current, preferred theory – that's the small insight. The larger consequence is that once someone begins to imagine how a single misperception might have led him astray, he can begin to consider that perhaps he has made other erroneous assumptions. A little light… then full sunshine.

2. So many trees, so little forest: "To start with, you were wrong about the new purchasing policy." "Was not." "Was too." We know arguments about minutiae can rapidly get mired in conflicting versions of each person's truth. Ask a mob of witnesses after the highway pile-up what color the speeding car was and you'll hear answers across the spectrum. When trying to fix workplace conflict, it's often more productive to shift away from details and focus on broader themes. A more philosophical conversation such as a shared aspiration for a civil working relationship, or mutual embarrassment that it nearly came to blows, can stimulate great strides. Suddenly the forest pops into view among all those tree trunks.

3. Go for the heart: "You obviously don't agree with his version of the facts, but what can you say about the impact this has had on him?" This strategy encourages a person to by-pass the details and connect with the human being behind the facts. If he's expressed an unprecedented dread of coming to work, or having workplace stress affect his home life, then encourage an acknowledgement, and even sympathy, regarding this angle. I've seen the words "I'm sorry you're suffering" change everything.

Training Offer
Looking to host a half-day workshop? In-Accord's "Constructive Workplace Conflict" equips employees with skills to manage everyday conflicts.

It's never this pretty when leaders clash in your organization.

When Peace Comes to Shove (*continued*)

4. Take a leap: Sometimes when you meet an immovable object (like a stance someone's taken on an issue) the wise action is to jump over it. So, when it's evident that resolution efforts – such as numbers 1 to 3 above – have failed, you can shift attention to another point or perhaps the future of the relationship. When everything else is resolved, that original sticking point may not seem so insurmountable after all. As a last resort, agreeing to disagree (often shorthand for never really trying to agree in the first place) is an option. Problems don't seem as gigantic when we're flying over them.

By the way, you might like to know that they never fully agreed on what happened during The Great Clipboard Shove. However, what's more important is that through facilitated discussions they reached key understandings, tangible agreements and even empathy – which mattered much more to their working relationship and the organization's ability to get things done.

Perspective

Looking at the sky, extend your thumb at arm's length. If you could see through your thumbnail to the edge of space you'd see a million galaxies.