

Waging war....at the water cooler

It has often been said that as long as two people stay in a room long enough, there will be conflict. I think it's safe to say that we could put one person in a room and establish that he/she on a bad day is a seething mess of internal conflict!

We only have to contemplate what is happening in the world right now to know that as smart as we are, as technologically advanced as we are, we still haven't mastered some of the basics. Why might that be?

Is it because we don't know how or because we "just don't wanna"! If we accept that conflict is common, then do we accept that conflict is inevitable? I would suggest that some conflict *is* inevitable and it is here that it is useful to distinguish between *realistic* and *non realistic* conflict.

Realistic conflict occurs between individuals clashing over opinions, beliefs, values or resources. Sometimes we want different things and sometimes the same thing (even a piece of land or a country) but we can't agree on how to divide it. An example of realistic conflict may be budget allocation ; a fixed pie with direct implications for the achievement of one party's outcomes when decisions are made.

Non realistic conflict stems from ignorance, intolerance, historical precedent or the need for tension release. Non realistic conflict may occur where two individuals with different personality or operating styles and perhaps pent up negative experiences with each other, clash with each other verbally, physically, psychologically; often resulting in the adoption of two differing positions and pushing them hard.

Let's not make a mistake. The two types of conflict are not mutually exclusive. Realistic elements of conflict can get inextricably caught up with the non realistic elements. In our earlier budget example, rational pragmatic business decisions about the projects to fund or promote and which to divest can put hurtful competitive strain on relationships; both parties seeing the funding allocation issue as a reflection of their respective worth rather than as decisions which align with strategic objectives. They take things personally and jockey for attention and resources in a win/lose way.

Why do we bother to distinguish?

Very simply, realistic conflict must be *managed*. Non realistic conflict can be *avoided or eliminated*.

Let's recognise however that some people:

- create non realistic conflict because it is a way of maintaining control

- have learnt patterns of behaviour that are difficult (but not impossible to break)
- use conflict to combat boredom and routine; that is, they don't need a high job focus so "people focus" becomes very salient
- may suffer from mental illness or disorders including personality and anxiety disorders thus creating challenges for themselves and others
- are reacting to a culture that may encourage competitive, even bullying behaviour resulting in non realistic conflict that is condoned or encouraged
- who are low on job or leadership skills and thereby inhibit their ability to get acceptable results. They may then resort to inappropriate behaviour out of frustration, feelings of helplessness and resentment.

It is easy for us to judge others and put them in one category or another. Let us not forget the dynamic nature of relationships. The issue is rarely the one individual; mostly the chemistry between the two.

If you find yourself in conflict with someone else it may be important to ask:

- Are there realistic or non realistic elements of the conflict?
- What may you have done to contribute to the conflict?
- Has the conflict served to foster creativity, lateral thinking and break out of complacency? (some of the benefits of conflict) and at what cost has this come?
- What choices have you made along the way? What moments of truth have you faced and how did you deal with them?

A case study

Let's explore a simple case. Judy reports to Mary. Mary has been asked to lead a department where the group norm of behaviour and acceptable performance is low. At times she recognises that she should tread softly in her first few months and use observation to guide and validate her instincts. On the other hand she has a clear mandate to make her people accountable and improve performance. As far as Mary is concerned, in her early assessment, Judy is under-performing so Mary begins to performance manage her.

Mary's enthusiasm to turn her new team around and Judy's power base make Judy an obvious subject for performance management. "If I fix Judy", says Mary to herself, I can fix anyone!"

Judy doesn't like the scrutiny she is receiving after being managed so loosely in the past. She has spoken with many people about her dislike of her new manager. She claims that Mary resents her because she is popular and experienced and wants to scapegoat someone because Mary is under pressure to turn the department around after the previous manager wimped out on team leadership.

Mary is becoming furious at the number of stories she is hearing from others about Judy being critical of her.

Realistically, Mary has a mandate to demand better performance and to counsel her staff member. Judy has the right to be treated with respect and consistency, not used as an example and certainly not given feedback until her manager can be sure that her dissatisfaction is justified.

Non realistically, Mary is furious that Judy is talking about her behind her back and may allow that to dictate her approach. Judy is trying to galvanise support and does not appear to be taking responsibility for genuine concerns.

In this case both have allowed emotional baggage to get in the way of establishing a mature and productive relationship characterised by honest, assertive and non defensive feedback from one to the other. They have made choices for which they are now both living the consequences.

Strategies

It is incumbent on the manager to attempt to be objective in the assessment of performance which could result in disciplinary action and for Judy to take responsibility for that "bit" of the team performance that is hers.

Mary could take a team based approach to coaching and/or training if performance is not up to scratch and ensure she has provided clear vision, expectations, reasonable timeframes and articulated consequences to all staff before she attempts to single one out.

Two suggestions would be to:

- encourage both to 'fight fair' (not get personal)
- *own their choices* and accept responsibility for exercising inappropriate options like loss of emotional control (Mary) or game playing or covert resistance (Judy).

In so doing, both increase their chances of being able to focus on the real(istic) issues that can make the biggest difference to both.