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Managing conflict: first, know it's inevitable

By Repps Hudson
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
04/18/2006



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Perhaps you missed that April is Workplace Conflict Awareness Month.

The month's half over, but it's not too late to learn a few things about how to manage the conflict stalking every workplace.

The person who came up with this appellation for April is Rick Brenner, founder and principal of Chaco Canyon Consulting, a management consulting firm in Boston (www.ChacoCanyon.com).

When I spoke with Brenner about his ideas on conflict management, he cited three principles to consider.

"You have to start by accepting conflict," said Brenner, who quickly noted the distinction between destructive conflict and creative conflict. "I wouldn't want to work in a place where there's no creative conflict."

For managers – and astute workers – the key is understanding the difference. Destructive conflict is the kind where two employees sabotage each other through gossip and backstabbing, instead of working for the team.

Brenner, a former software and artificial intelligence engineer, believes that managers always should be on the lookout for budding conflict they can head off before it becomes harmful to employees and to the group's effort.

The mission should not be threatened by squabbling employees.

"A manager may be causing this," Brenner said. "He may favor one employee over the other."

The manager may benefit from coaching, which should come from outside of the office, Brenner said. A professional management consultant or coach can take a more objective view of the problem.

Can a manager do a self-evaluation and learn how to handle workers more even-handedly?

"Looking in the mirror will pay," Brenner said, "but it's awfully hard to do."

A skilled manager will encourage a brew of ideas, yet not let their discussion or exchange become mean.

The tone the manager sets, Brenner said, is usually the key to how conflict is handled in the workplace.

Brenner's second principle is a well-known axiom among management consultants: The problem is never the problem.

"What people are arguing about is not what the conflict is about," he said.

Lingering issues from previous encounters may be there, or that unfairness thing may be the driving force.

Here a skilled manager must be perceptive and patient – and require the embattled workers to step back, cool off and deal with their conflicts, both on the surface and much deeper.

"The solution," Brenner said, "is to get each person to explain his perspective and to look at the other person's perspective."

Isn't that almost a superhuman thing, to get employees to reason calmly in the heat of battle?

"Sure," said Brenner, "but the manager could say, 'We have lots of conflicts. We have to work together to understand each other.'..."

None of this is easy, obviously. Brenner and many other management experts make the point that managing conflicts in the workplace requires continuous attention.

A manager cannot just walk away from quarreling employees and hope things will work themselves out, he said, because they seldom do – and the risk to the team is too great.

The third Brenner principle: There's no such thing as a personality clash.

"Maybe it's a situation of roles," said Brenner. "It could be job definitions, or who gets credit. When we have success, we tend to attribute that to one person. A salesman may get credit, but what about the genius of the product design? There could be hundreds of people involved in the design of a product or a system."

"We really don't have a way to award credit to groups," said Brenner, who named his consulting firm after the Anasazi's Chaco Canyon, a city in what's now New Mexico built and inhabited between 850 and 1250 A.D.

"The main lesson is that the Anasazi sustained their vision of the project over a long period of time," Brenner said.

The evidence of the Anasazi's ability to work together, despite inevitable conflict, is the remains of their intricate dwellings.

If the Anasazi could build Chaco Canyon, Brenner said, we in the modern age can take hope from their effort.

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