

When Push Comes to Shove

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Today I spent half of my day try to figure out how to get two employees who don't get along, to work on a deadline driven task. They can't agree how to approach the task, let alone meet the deadline. It takes up my time, my energy and there is a cost to the organization.

"Remember that when unhealthy conflict happens, and you can't reach consensus but still need to make a decision, one of the best things you can do is to listen, then act."

Research indicates that up to 60% of all difficulties in organizations arise as a result of strained relationships between employees. It also indicates that typical managers spend more than 25% of their time dealing with workplace conflicts. Some may feel like sticking their heads in the sand and just waiting for things to resolve themselves, but that's a dangerous proposition. The result of unmanaged conflict is high staff turnover, loss of productive time, poor decisions, increased complaints and loss of client confidence. So, what to do?

Betty Pries, a mediator and authority on workplace conflict, says that there *is* such a thing as healthy conflict. "It's possible to come away from disagreements energized," she says. "I've worked on projects with people where we've disagreed wildly and I loved it! You can fight passionately, but it must be done with respect and honesty – even humour." Disagreements or opinions should stay focused on the issue or problem, not on anyone involved in the process, states Pries.

You know you've entered unhealthy conflict territory when:

- Things get personal – people talk *about* each other, instead of *to* each other.
- People lose sight of the original problem.
- They are more interested in being right than hearing others out.
- Sabotaging the project or someone else's work comes to mind.
- People get stuck in either/or thinking.
- Players lose sight of perspective – they start building their own case so they get support.
- People are forced to agree with a decision.

In the arena of healthy conflict, Betty says that one of the most important things you can do is to de-personalize the issue - ask *what* is the problem, not *who* is the problem. "Often, if there's a problem with a person or a team, it's really a symptom of the system. And if a system's unhealthy, getting rid of someone won't solve the problem – the same thing will arise with someone else. Think about the systems you have in place – do they allow for healthy or unhealthy conflict? The values you espouse should match the values you practise. If they don't, employees will catch the difference, resulting in frustration and anger."

WARNING: When trying to resolve conflict in a healthy way, be prepared for push-back. People can be averse to eliminating conflict because, believe it or not, it's comforting. At least it can seem more comforting than what might come next. It's the old "devil you know is better than the devil you don't know" syndrome. The other complication is that sometimes people have developed their identities around conflict – their friendships, their discussions and their energy is spent



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talking about the problem. If it went away, their foundation for coming together would evaporate. It's up to managers to develop strong conflict management skills – they have the moral authority to do so, and these proficiencies and skills will trickle down to others within the organization. And remember that when unhealthy conflict happens, and you can't reach consensus but still need to make a decision, one of the best things you can do is to listen, then act. "People don't necessarily want to make a decision, they want to be heard and recognized as being heard. When that happens, they'll support and agree to almost any decision," concludes Pries.

