

A COMMON VICIOUS CIRCLE AND HOW TO AVOID IT.

AVOIDING AN UNNECESSARY SPIRAL

by Clive Johnson and Jackie Keddy

Unchecked and inappropriately managed conflict creates a whole new life of its own, consuming energy, time and money, but often without anyone emerging beneficially. As employment tribunals hit an all-time high and the true costs of managing conflict continue to rise, it may be time to re-examine what can be done to prevent most falling into a wasteful bitter spiral.

Stark statistics

Recent research suggests that conflict resolution costs UK businesses nearly £40 billion each year [1], not to mention the adverse publicity, unproductively channelled energy and additional pressures which ineffectively managed conflicts can produce, often leading to work-driven sickness for the aggrieved and “accused” alike. Meantime, it’s been revealed that the cost of mental health to organisations exceeds £25 billion each year [2] and Professional Manager reports that employment tribunals have increased by 43% in the past year. [3].

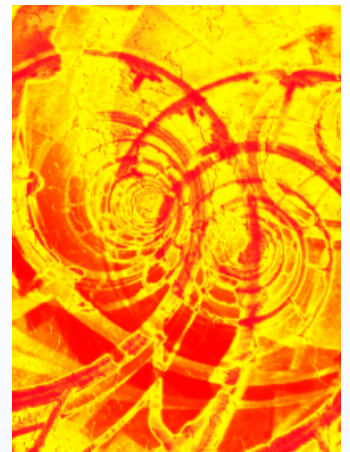
Any HR or Organisation Development director might reasonably be expected to ask what’s going wrong?

Undoubtedly, the current down-turn is having one influence. For those served redundancy notices or already laid off, there’s less incentive to maintain the peace than those who are left to hold the fort. But even the apparently quiet and unruffled may be harbouring mounting frustration and discontentment.

Stemming the rise in tribunal cases amongst those who feel displaced and who’ve already contacted their lawyers may be a largely futile task, but much can be done to relieve the concerns of the silent malcontents - and to prevent the onset of unhealthy conflict in the first place.

Managing in the ‘golden hour’

A preventive conflict management strategy is key to making this difference, and this crucially needs to recognise the role which front-line managers can play in preventing, spotting and tackling the unhelpful disagreements which break out in their teams.



Out of control

Workplace disputes which can't be resolved quickly often end up affecting far more than the original parties involved. Apart from the financial and time costs associated with attempting to broker a resolution, team motivation, mis-channelled energy and damaged reputations combine to divert talent and attention away from more constructive activities.

Managed correctly, an embryonic dispute may be quickly diffused, avoiding potentially significant time and effort which might otherwise have been needed had it escalated further.

Often, the original trigger for a dispute may appear quite mundane, however it's when individuals' positions become entrenched and a game of bat and ball begins between two increasingly diametrically opposed parties that the task of reaching a quick and easy resolution usually becomes a challenge.

Time is usually of the essence: a front-

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line manager's ability to both recognise when an unhelpful dispute is brewing and to intervene in a helpful way usually needs to happen within a very short time window. This is what we call "the golden hour".

Being able to recognise the incidence of a fledgling dispute of course provides a head start for brokering a resolution, but even when it takes an individual to make known a disagreement with a colleague, the "golden hour" opportunity need not necessarily have passed. Disputes can still be stopped dead in their tracks before they escalate into a vicious circle of intensifying positions, closed mindsets, and firm resolve.

In the "golden hour", a manager's main task is to help both parties put understand what underpins their dispute and to encourage them to see the benefits of resolving it as swiftly as possible, even if this may involve making a compromise. Both parties need to be quickly brought together, probably following an initial private discussion with each, common ground between them needs to be identified, the origins and reasons why the

dispute has started to develop need to be uncovered, and both parties need to be engaged in a mindset of wanting to bring the matter to a speedy close.

A manager then needs to cram what might otherwise require several days of mediation into a brief conversation. To compound this challenge, time may not be available to plan a breakout, make private meeting room bookings, and allow each individual to prepare before coming together, especially if other staff management or work demands are pressing. In fact, delay is not normally something which might be encouraged, giving as it does an opportunity for each individual to further deepen their disagreement and develop their opposing positions.

However, it's sensible for a manager to be prepared for an unexpected diversion into a "mini mediation" conversation. Equipped with appropriate techniques and being aware of the principles and pitfalls of local conflict management, this should be well within most managers' grasp.

In particular, having access to a micro-tool - or a sharp, quick, to-the-point dialogue structure - may give managers confidence to start tackling conflict in a concerted way, having access to easy-to-remember approaches which can apply in a variety of situations.

Thinking proactively

Managers can also have a significant role to play in preventing or minimising the

occurrence of unhealthy conflict by building teams in which individuals feel able to say when they have a niggling dispute with a colleague, but also to be able to recognise when having differences can be a strength for the team. A key to being an effective conflict manager is therefore to be found in the way managers lead their teams.

All of this implies a need to put conflict management training fully in context with a manager's responsibilities to both the people they manage and their organisation, and to be sure that the training and support which do receive is appropriate.

Unfortunately, all too often, conflict management training stops at looking at principles and perhaps allowing an opportunity for a few role-plays. It is rarely fully integrated with other L&D interventions such as coaching and action learning sets, and follow-on support is often limited too.

The cost of not managing conflict effectively can be readily recognised by anyone who has an awareness of people management strategy. It's also one where HR, L&D and managers alike can come together to make real impact. Maybe it's time to check that your conflict training is up to date and up to scratch?

References:

- [1] CEDR, 2006; *Daily Mail*, 04/12/09.
- [2] The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health: Policy Paper 8, December 2007
- [3] 'Management World', *Professional Manager*, September 2009; www.employmenttribunals.gov.uk.

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