

Informal Conflict Resolution: A Workplace Case Study

Introduction

Conflict resolution practice has largely focused on conflict taking place in public, as if it was set on a theater stage with an audience watching the interactions unfold. In reality, conflict plays out behind the scenes, unobserved by the conflict analysts and system designers. Kolb and Bartunek, editors of **Hidden Conflict in Organizations**, bring to light the dynamics of informal conflict resolution. In this context, informal conflict resolution is defined as resolution facilitated by organizational members through other means than the formal processes of grievances, investigations and litigation (Kolb and Bartunek, 1992. p. 19). These informal conflict resolvers make a significant impact upon organizations either by resolving the conflict or channeling it to a formal mechanism.

Informal conflict resolution often takes a nonrational approach (Kolb and Bartunek, 1992, p. 20). Kolb and Bartunek describe this approach as accenting "the unconscious or spontaneous aspects of disputing, ones that are driven by impulse and the feelings of participants and not simply their cognition" (1992, p. 20). Therefore, emotions are seen as a means of conflict management rather than a hindrance to conflict management (Kolb and Bartunek, 1992. p. 20). In essence, Kolb and Bartunek are attempting to reclaim emotion as a valid expression in conflict resolution, and that expressing emotion does not necessarily imply a loss of reason. Furthermore, they imply that the formal methods of conflict resolution favor the rational over the emotional.

Retrieving the power and validity of emotion that was tossed along the wayside during the Age of Reason, is needed to gain a holistic picture of conflict dynamics. But it also needs a caveat; for intense emotion can cause reactivity that clouds the way to resolution. From a family systems perspective, "the problem that triggered the emotions is never addressed; emotions are merely generated and circuited and recircuited through the system (Gilbert, 1992. p. 40). In the context of family systems theory, emotions are neither bad nor good. What matters is the level of intensity of emotion and the duration in which it occurs.

While the family systems approach may seem to conflict with Kolb and Bartunek's validation of emotion as a conflict resolution tool, the two ideas are actually complimentary. The intense emotion, otherwise called anxiety, calls attention to the need for resolving a conflict that may not be expressed publicly. Once the cause of the anxiety is identified and emotions expressed, people can think more clearly and be better equipped to solve the problem. The following workplace conflict illustrates this continuum of emotion and its intersection with cognitive reasoning. It also highlights the important role an Ombudsman can play in uncovering and working through emotion, paving the way toward resolution.

The Conflict

In a large publishing company in New York, a young woman, Laura, was hired as a copy editor for one of the many journals produced by the company. Seven other employees worked on this team editing this Journal, including a senior editor named Tim. Laura had worked there for about a month

when she and her fellow co-workers went for happy-hour after work. Everybody had a great time and had consumed a fair amount of alcohol. When everybody was leaving the bar to head home, Tim, who had been secretly attracted to Laura since she started work at the journal, hailed a cab and offered to share the ride with Laura. Laura accepted the offer. Once she was inside the cab, Tim then suddenly made an aggressive sexual advance toward her. Horrified, Laura pushed him away and told him to get out of the cab. Mortified, Tim slinked out of the cab.

The next day, Laura came to work with some apprehension. How would she deal with Tim? Would the cab incident affect her job? Although Tim did not supervise her, would he try to get her fired? Tim immediately went to her office and apologized for his extremely inappropriate behavior in the cab. Relieved at his apology, Laura decided not to pursue the matter through any formal channels in the office. She figured that since Tim apologized, there was no need to dwell on the incident. After all, Laura was a new employee, still in the process of learning the office politics and proving herself as being a competent editor. She did not want to rock the boat or bring negative attention to herself.

Everything would have been okay if Tim had stopped at just one sincerely expressed apology. However, whenever he found himself alone with Laura, Tim apologized again. And again. He said he was sorry about the incident at every opportunity he had for three months. This constant apology was awkward and annoying to Laura. Ironically, by Tim apologizing continuously for his unwanted attention in the cab, he was foisting another form of unwanted attention upon Laura. When he first started apologizing, Laura told him that "it was okay". After three months of many apologies, she reached a point where she asked him to stop apologizing, to no avail. Frustrated, she confided in a few co-workers about her unusual dilemma. Consequently, these co-workers lost respect for Tim.

Although the cab incident was not common knowledge in the office, Tim sensed that others knew about it by the way they interacted with him. The incident became the office "elephant" that the employees "in the know" saw, but didn't explicitly acknowledge. Meanwhile, Laura was tired of hearing Tim apologize and her feelings of discomfort increased. So when another editor position opened up in another journal division of the company, she applied for the job and was transferred to the other journal. In her new position, she didn't have Tim bothering her anymore. But she was unhappy with her new job. The journal material was very boring. She didn't work as well with her co-workers as she did in the previous journal (excepting Tim). She realized that she really enjoyed her old job. She began to regret her decision to avoid the conflict with Tim by moving to the new job. In an effort to seek advice as to how to solve her problem, Laura decided to consult with the company ombudsman.

Analysis of Conflict

The initial cause of the conflict, the sexual advance in the cab, occurred in a private enclosed setting. Sexual overtures are inherently private, but the consequences were played out in the public context of the office. And, as Bartunek et al. state, the public spaces of the workplace keep conflict in check and "masked through shared conventions that keep it from open view" (1992, p. 213). Informal, private conflict handling is generally manifested through nonrational expression, such as gossip, strong emotion, and passive-aggressive behavior (Bartunek et al., p. 216). As seen in the conflict between Laura and Tim, in the privacy of their instances of being alone together, "nonrational discourse dominates" and "members find ways to express their disagreements with each other"; consequently, "these means have substantial - though hidden - impacts on the course of

public conflict" (Bartunek et. al., p. 217). Tim's apologies became a non-rational expression conveyed privately to Laura. In kind, Laura responded through informal, private means. And the private interactions had a detrimental impact upon the office environment.

In fact, the primary reason Laura came to the Ombudsman for advice was that the conflict was private, and she wanted to share her problem in confidence. The Ombudsman's role is well suited to informal conflict handling. Unlike formal complaint resolution process, the Ombudsman maintains confidentiality of the problem unless given express permission to do otherwise. Hence, the Ombudsman can exercise more informal dispute resolution options, such as listening, providing and receiving information, reframing issues and developing options, role-playing and shuttle diplomacy (Rowe, M., 1995. pp. 5-7). In doing so, an Ombudsman can be a calming influence that enables people to think through their problem. Particularly with situations where people feel harassed, the Ombudsman can offer more options than the formal grievance process.

In Mary Rowe's article, "People Who Feel Harassed Need a Complaint System With Both Formal and Informal Options", she raises the possibility that people who are more affected by harassment are those with the least amount of power in the workplace (p. 171). Consequently, these people need employers "to provide many different access people and different options open to the choice of complainants, including the option of learning on a confidential basis how to deal directly with harassers" (p. 171). The issue of power in the case of Laura and Tim is a large underlying factor, which has influenced the turn of events.

Laura certainly felt powerless. Tim's aggressive sexuality displayed in the cab, as well as his underlying assumption that his sexual advance would be welcomed by Laura, reveals the inequities placed upon women in our male-dominated society. A woman in Western society is sexualized as an object; whereas, a man is rarely treated in such a way (Connell, 1987. p. 113). Hence, Laura was confronted with Tim's narcissistic assumption that she would be happy to receive his attentions, along with the male ideology of claiming women as objects of desire. This power imbalance was then carried into the sexual politics of the workplace.

Connell states that "power may be a balance of advantage or an inequality of resources in a workplace, a household, or a larger institution" (1987, p. 107). While Laura certainly felt indignant at Tim's behavior, her main concern the next day was preserving her reputation and keeping her job. Laura was worried about maintaining a neutralized sexuality in the office environment, fearing a reputation of being sexually "easy". Such a label would effectively overshadow any power that she could assert through knowledge or skill. Consequently, Laura chose not to risk placing herself in a position to be unfairly labeled by the office power structure even though Tim's offensive and boorish behavior invaded her sense of security and confidence. She resisted reporting Tim's inappropriate behavior because she didn't want to be perceived as complicitous.

In analyzing this scenario, Laura and Tim are subtly negotiating for power. Following the cab incident, Laura and Tim were implicitly negotiating for maintaining their own credibility in the workplace. Laura and Tim's interactions imply a testing of what each of them value. Both value their reputation in the office. Otherwise, Tim wouldn't feel compelled to apologize in an effort to "check" on Laura's feelings about him to gauge her inclination to blab about him in the office. If Laura wasn't concerned about her reputation and standing within the office, she may have told the

director about the cab incident. Both are testing the waters of their professional standing. Both wanted others to view them with respect.

The predominant value claimer is Tim. Not only did he try to "claim" Laura in the cab, but through his repeated apologies, claimed the value of a non-anxious work environment and Laura's peace of mind. His apologies were a form of the power of persistence, which caused Laura to question his motives. Furthermore, Tim's persistent apologies impinged upon Laura's personal boundary and made her feel that he was asking for more than forgiveness. Tim's apologies could be seen as a way to manipulate Laura into not informing the director or other co-workers about the cab incident. Tim is playing on Laura's "niceness" by doing the honorable thing of apologizing in hopes that she doesn't break this etiquette.

Laura was trying to maintain the value of their reputations at work by withholding the information about the cab incident. She was willing to let the unfortunate incident go without retaliation until Tim's persistence became annoying. Then she confided in a couple of her friends at work. Tim sensed his loss of credibility through these employees' reactions to him. In this respect, Laura claimed value by divulging Tim's sexual faux pas. She claimed the power of knowledge, but at a cost of placing her co-workers in an awkward position.

The ethical issues surrounding Tim and Laura's negotiation tactics are not clear cut. On the surface, we may view Tim as well-meaning in his apologies yet socially inept in his ability to gauge when to stop apologizing. Nevertheless, we can look upon Tim's apologies as intrusive, which causes his apologies to lose their meaning of goodwill. It could be a form of harassment wherein Laura cannot escape, for she is dependent upon her job to support herself. Removing herself from the situation would cost Laura her income. Laura did not possess the economic freedom to quit her job.

On the other hand, was Laura behaving ethically by not telling Tim emphatically that he stop apologizing? Lets assume that Tim was completely unaware of the affect of his continuous apologizing. He had no intention of being intrusive. Shouldn't Laura have enlightened him of the inappropriateness of his behavior? Even if he didn't stop, at least she could feel good about herself by being assertive. Instead, she passively accepted the situation.

Because the cab incident was kept hidden from public awareness and resolution, anxiety rose within Laura, Tim and the office. From the perspective of anxiety as exacerbating the conflict, Murray Bowen's family systems theory is a useful framework for analysis. Family systems theory posits that people are not independent and unaffected by others' emotions. Rather, people form an emotional unit such as a family or work group that acts as the electrical circuit for the flow of anxiety from one person to another, which ultimately limits the group's ability to think clearly and calmly. The anxiety is manifested through several relationship patterns. The patterns that apply in Laura and Tim's situation are triangling and distancing.

In triangling, a conflict between two people increases anxiety to the point where, in an attempt to relieve it, another person or persons is drawn into the conflict. This pattern can be seen in Laura confiding in her co-workers about her dilemma with Tim. As a result of the triangle between Tim, Laura and her fellow editors, the anxiety between Tim and Laura was passed on to her co-workers. The co-workers expressed this anxiety through their discomfort around Tim and the changed

attitude toward Tim. Thus, the triangle that occurred may have momentarily ameliorated Laura's anxiety, but actually served to spread it to others and keep it alive.

Compounding the anxiety is the secret nature of the cab incident. The knowledge that these co-workers had about the secret created the "elephant in the room" phenomena, an analogy where the secret is the "elephant" looming large in everyone's awareness, but people studiously ignore it. Friedman states that secrets "act as the plaque in the arteries of communication; they cause stoppage in the general flow and not just at the point of their existence" (1985, p. 52). Secrets divide a group, for those who are privy to the secret are better able to communicate with those who know it than those who do not (Friedman, 1985. p. 52). This dynamic applies to any issue, not just the secret. The secret of the cab incident not only hindered open communication within the office, but also created "unnecessary estrangements as well as false companionship" (Friedman, 1985. p. 52).

Tim's constant apologies, possibly motivated by the increased anxiety he felt from his co-workers, escalated the anxiety even more. Finally, the intensity of anxiety reached a point where the second pattern, distancing, was bound to occur. Distancing is common when the anxiety becomes unbearable to one or both parties in conflict. In an attempt to reduce the anxiety, one or both parties seek physical or emotional distance from one another. Often, one person distances from another in response to the other's pursuit. The more one person pursues, the more the pursued distances (Gilbert, 1992. p. 53). The problem with the distancing pattern is that "outwardly, the partners express distance towards the other, but inwardly they maintain an intense focus on one another and the relationship" (Gilbert, 1992. p. 55). Distancing actually intensifies feelings (Gilbert, 1992. p. 55).

In an attempt to relieve her anxiety caused by Tim's excessive apologies, Laura left the anxious work environment for another editor position within the company. But Laura was still troubled. She was caught in the implicit cultural endorsement of objectifying women and then experienced the double-bind of assuming a disproportional burden of responsibility for the consequences. Because she didn't want to be seen as a troublemaker and a wanton one at that, she resisted reporting the incident. Instead, Laura and Tim engaged in an implicit negotiation over their reputation and standing within the professional realm of the office. Although Laura was at a disadvantage from the context of a male hegemonic society, she did possess the power of knowledge that could tarnish Tim's reputation as well. Yet this knowledge was a two-edged sword, striking a blow to the integrity and credibility of both.

Laura's dilemma is a common one, as illustrated by Rowe's characteristics of harassed people seeking help from Ombudsman. Rowe reports that most people in this situation fear the negative consequences of reporting harassment taking the form of not only of retaliation, but also from "silent rejection or disapproval by co-workers and family, and the loss of goodwill from employers" (1990, p. 164). Reporters of harassment also fear a loss of privacy that a public complaint will bring. Most importantly, reporters believe that they lack the sufficient evidence of the offensive behavior, which places them in the untenable position of "his word against mine" (Rowe, 1990. p. 165). And lastly, most reporters "say they do not wish to go to a third party, but feel they lack the skills they need to change the situation effectively" (Rowe, 1990. p. 165). In light of Bowen's family systems theory, these characteristics all add up to an anxious work environment, which impedes functioning of the work group.

Anxiety creates a reactive atmosphere that stifles creative problem-solving. People are so caught up in the emotion of the situation that calm and rational thinking is impossible, both within an individual and within an organization. Obviously, this affects work performance. This individual and collective impact of anxiety makes identification of stakeholders in Laura and Tim's conflict an easy process. Besides Laura and Tim, the other employees of the division have a stake in the outcome due to the anxiety level in the office affecting their performance. The Director also has a stake in the conflict for the same reason. Not to be overlooked, the Ombudsman also is a stakeholder because her job in part is to help maintain harmonious, productive relationships in the workplace.

The first step toward finding a resolution of the conflict is to discover what Laura truly wants. She could choose to pursue the matter through a rights-based mechanism to seek redress for sexual harassment. Costantino and Merchant define rights-based methods as "grounded in fixed rules or principles: they impose a determination based on entitlements, merits, credibility, and positions" (1996, p. 45). Or she could choose to pursue the matter through an interest-based mechanism to address her wish that Tim stop his apologizing and leave her alone. In interest-based methods, parties identify their interests and concerns to arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement (Costantino and Merchant, 1996, p. 45).

It is unlikely that the rights-based approach of a lawsuit would serve any useful purpose. For one thing, Tim's sexual advance in the cab may not fit the legal description of sexual harassment. Displaying uncouth and crass behavior does not necessarily translate into harassment as written in law. Furthermore, Laura did not experience retaliation for refusing Tim's sexual overture; in fact, she received apologies. Tim's legal counsel would certainly depict Laura as a paranoid schizophrenic for taking offense at Tim trying to make amends. Besides courtroom drama, a rights-based decision may not solve the problem. Laura still may not feel good about herself. Tim may not either. They may continue to carry around anxiety, or even experience an increase in anxiety within themselves.

An interest-based approach is better suited to the conflict between Tim and Laura because focusing on interests can help them better understand each other. The Ombudsman can help bring about greater understanding through listening, facilitation of dialogue between Laura and Tim, problem-solving, and mediating the conflict. These interest-based techniques are considered better methods of dispute resolution "because they result in lower transaction costs, greater satisfaction with outcomes, less strain on the parties' relationship, and lower recurrence of disputes (Costantino and Merchant, 1996, pp. 45-46).

Laura's primary interest is to have a challenging and fulfilling job in which she is respected. She wants to be free of that tight, panicky feeling in her gut whenever she sees Tim. Laura wants to be seen as a competent professional, not a floozy who flagrantly violates the unwritten rule of avoiding sexual dalliances with male co-workers. Yet she wants to have a somewhat informal, enjoyable working relationship with her colleagues. Tim's interests are the same as Laura's. He doesn't like the predicament his attraction to Laura has led him to. Actually, the humiliating rejection he experienced in the cab effectively killed his initial interest in Laura. Now he feels stupid and guilty and compelled to make sure that Laura doesn't think he is a complete oaf. And he doesn't want the miserable cab experience to be recast into a tale of attempted rape. He too wants a challenging and fulfilling job in which he is respected. He too enjoys easy banter with his cohorts.

The interests of the other employees in the division is to regain the pleasant atmosphere they once enjoyed prior to the uneasiness of the relationship between Tim and Laura. They like both Laura and Tim, but the cab incident has put them in an awkward position. The tension is high in the office and nobody knows what to do about it. The two employees to whom Laura confided the incident no longer feel that Tim is as wonderful as they originally thought. Nevertheless, while they wouldn't consider Tim as a friend outside of work, they have no problem with him on a professional level. Tim does his job well.

Although the Managing Editor of the Journal is unaware of the specific incident between Laura and Tim, he has sensed some tension in the air. He considers Laura and Tim to be exemplary employees, but lately they have not been their usual productive selves. He convinces himself that his employees go through normal ups and downs, and Laura and Tim will bounce back to their former level of high performance. Even with his rationale, the Managing Editor still can't shake the feeling that something is amiss. To quell this strange feeling, he has been leaving the office more and more to play squash at the gym.

The common thread running through everyone's interests in the alleviation of anxiety. "Intensifying anxiety for the individual is marked by heightened sensitivity to others in the group, shifts in perception and interpretation of events and behavior, and an increasing automaticity of behavior" (Papero, 1996. p. 49). The key to reducing anxiety within an individual and consequently, the group that an individual is a part of, is the process of differentiation. Differentiation defined simply is the ability to adapt and cope with the demands of life (Gilbert, 1992. p. 18). This adaptability requires flexibility in response and calm assessment of a situation to determine action in accordance with one's principles. Gilbert states that "at higher levels of differentiation, people have more choice about whether to follow the guidance of the thinking self or the guidance of the emotional/feeling self. They are better able to separate these two functions. At lower levels of differentiation, the intellectual and emotional guidance systems are fused, allowing little or no choice between the two and making the intellect essentially emotionally driven" (1992, p. 21).

To translate the concept of differentiation to the level of practice, the process is essentially learning to be a calm presence, not reacting automatically to anxious situations, and dealing with relational conflicts at their source. Differentiation demands a higher level of self-awareness and awareness of how one fits into emotional systems. For example, if Tim and Laura had managed to calm their anxiety enough to be able to talk openly about the issues stemming from the cab incident, then the continuous apologies and their attendant anxiety may have been prevented. Instead, Tim manifested his own intensifying anxiety into continuous apologies, which escalated Laura's anxiety. Laura triangled other co-workers into the problem. The intensity finally drove Laura to transfer to another job. To resolve the problem, the Ombudsman can assist Laura and Tim become more differentiated by facilitating direct communication between them to express their concerns and find ways to resolve the anxiety.

Of course, by intervening in the conflict, the Ombudsman is consciously triangling herself into the conflict. While the ideal is to avoid triangles and deal directly with the person causing conflict, the fact remains that the pattern of triangling will never be eliminated. It is an automatic human response. However, the Ombudsman can use the triangle as a way to encourage Tim and Laura to talk directly with one another and learn how to better manage their emotions. This is done through

the Ombudsman providing a calm presence, which in the same way that anxiety is infectious, can help calm Tim and Laura enough to enable them to find solutions.

Toward Resolution of the Conflict

Realizing that Laura's and Tim's interests are strikingly similar, the Ombudsman suggests to Laura that the three of them talk together privately about the issue. The Ombudsman would facilitate the discussion and mediate disagreements if necessary. Laura agreed. The Ombudsman would first talk to Tim in order to ascertain if he was willing to talk with Laura, as well as allay any fears he may have about her impartiality.

The Ombudsman met with Tim to broach the subject of a facilitated discussion with Laura. Tim was quite surprised about Laura approaching the Ombudsman about the cab incident. After the Ombudsman explained that all conversations pertaining to the conflict are held in confidence, Tim seemed relieved. The Ombudsman conveyed Laura's feelings of being victimized and harassed because of Tim's apologies, and how she wanted to resolve these feelings. Tim was confused about why this had become a major issue to Laura. The way he saw it, he was simply trying to do the gentlemanly thing by apologizing. Laura's reaction to his first apology was ambiguous to him; she said "everything's okay" but somehow it was an unsatisfying resolution to him. Concluding that Laura didn't think he was sincere in his apology, Tim continued to apologize to let her know that he truly meant what he said. He emphatically told the Ombudsman that he had no intention of harassing her or causing her emotional distress.

A meeting was held shortly thereafter. The Ombudsman began by explaining her role as a neutral, confidential resource for problem-solving and conflict resolution. Then she told them that each would be able to tell their stories without interruptions. Afterwards, Laura and Tim could ask questions or express concerns. Finally, they would discuss ways to resolve the issue. The Ombudsman stressed again that anything said during this meeting was strictly confidential and would not be placed in personnel files or reported to anyone else in the office.

The Ombudsman asked Laura to tell Tim her perspective of the conflict. Laura, in a halting voice, told Tim that his sexual move in the cab left her confused and angry. She thought that it was nice of Tim to offer sharing the cab and had no forewarning of his interest in her. Laura felt that Tim violated her trust in him. She was angry that Tim seemed to think of her more as a sexual object than a professional editor. Consequently, she began to lose confidence in herself. To make things worse, Tim's apologies were a constant reminder of her denigrated position. In a way, it was more intrusive than the cab incident. At least in the cab, she felt she could get away from him. In the office, she couldn't get away and felt helpless as a result. She tried to tell him to stop, but it seemed to bear no results. To top it all off, Laura felt guilty and angry at herself for not being able to stand up for herself and not let Tim affect her.

Tim declared that he had no intention of hurting her. Yes, he had his eye on Laura ever since she started working at the Journal. She was pretty and fun to work with. Yet Tim admitted that his pass at her in the cab was a stupid mistake, and he truly regretted and was embarrassed by his behavior. Tim was even more remorseful after hearing Laura's painful account of the emotional ramifications the incident had upon her. But that's where the empathy stopped. Tim justified his continuing apologies as an attempt to make clear that he was sincere. He told Laura to lighten up. He certainly

didn't understand how his apologies could be construed as harassment. If Laura felt that way, then it was her problem. He was only trying to be nice, and now she makes him out to be a sociopath. Tim asked Laura why she hates him so.

The Ombudsman sensed how the tension between Laura and Tim was making her feel tense as well. Before speaking, she sat in silence for a few moments to calm herself, knowing that any expression of her own anxiety would further increase the anxiety in the room. She paraphrased Tim's and Laura's perspectives and commented that both of them have suffered from the cab incident. Both felt guilt and shame. As difficult as this discussion may be, the Ombudsman complimented them for their openness in sharing their feelings with each other. Framing the emotional issues, the Ombudsman stated that this discussion can pave the way for healing by helping them lay aside old grievances, increase understanding, build trust, reduce anger and begin to forgive each other (Gold, 1993. p. 257). She asked Tim and Laura what they hoped to gain from this facilitated discussion.

The Ombudsman's positive and calm feedback gave Tim and Laura the ability to take a few steps back from the intense situation and think about their interests. Turning to Laura, Tim said he recognized the pain he caused her and understood that his pass in the cab was wrong. His guilt about the incident caused him to repeat his apologies. All he wanted now was for Laura to hear and accept his apology. Then he would be able to put the whole thing behind him and move on. Tim hoped that Laura would be able to do the same.

Laura replied by saying that she felt she had accepted his apology the morning after the incident occurred. But after hearing Tim, she realized that her response to his apology was not as clear as Tim needed to clear his conscious. Laura really held no reservation in accepting his apology over the cab incident. Hence, she clearly stated her acknowledgment of Tim's apology and her acceptance of it. Now that she understood why Tim continued to apologize, she wasn't as angry at him. Even so, it still bothered her that Tim didn't acknowledge the affect his repeated apologies had on her. Laura asked Tim if he could at least recognize her feelings. Tim thanked her for accepting his apology and reciprocated in part by honoring her viewpoint about his continued apologies, but also held to his opinion that she was overreacting.

The Ombudsman asked Laura how she felt about Tim's statement. Laura said she could live with this resolution to agree to disagree on that particular point, as long as Tim did not negate her feelings. Tim reiterated that he heard her feelings. After repeating the progress made thus far, the Ombudsman asked them if they were to work in the same office again, would they feel comfortable interacting with one another. Tim quickly replied that he would have no problem with working with Laura again. Laura revealed that she had approached her former boss about the possibility of transferring back into her old job. Her boss said he would be happy to have her back. She told Tim and the Ombudsman that she needed some time to think about her job options before she could answer the Ombudsman's question. After checking for any other concerns they wanted to address, the Ombudsman thanked Tim and Laura for coming in to talk and offered to talk further with either one of them if they so chose.

About a week later, Laura called the Ombudsman. After some soul-searching, she concluded that she wanted to be an editor in an environment other than academic journal publication. She realized that she was limiting her options by focusing on getting her old job back. Laura's anger at Tim masked her growing discontent over the content of what she was editing at the journal. Actually, she

discovered her real interest to be in a more mainstream book publication arena, such as editing for Bantam Books or Simon and Schuster. So she was embarking on a job search.

Conclusion

Clearly, emotional expression was a crucial element of not only the conflict and its escalation, but also its resolution. Whereas Kolb and Bartunek raise awareness of the emotional realm in conflict, Murray Bowen's family systems theory brings its consequences into sharp focus. In light of conflict evaluation and resolution, the emotional patterns exhibited in times of anxiety can serve as a warning signal that intervention is needed. Family systems theory is a useful theoretical framework particularly for Ombudsman, who tend to resolve problems informally, in helping people work through conflict. The Ombudsman's goal is essentially the same end as that of differentiation in family systems theory - to enable people to more effectively manage life's challenges. If Ombudsman and other types of conflict resolvers share their knowledge of emotional patterns with parties in conflict, then they are invited to join the life-long process of differentiation. Even a small step towards less reactivity and greater self-awareness makes a significant difference in preventing destructive conflict.

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Biography

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