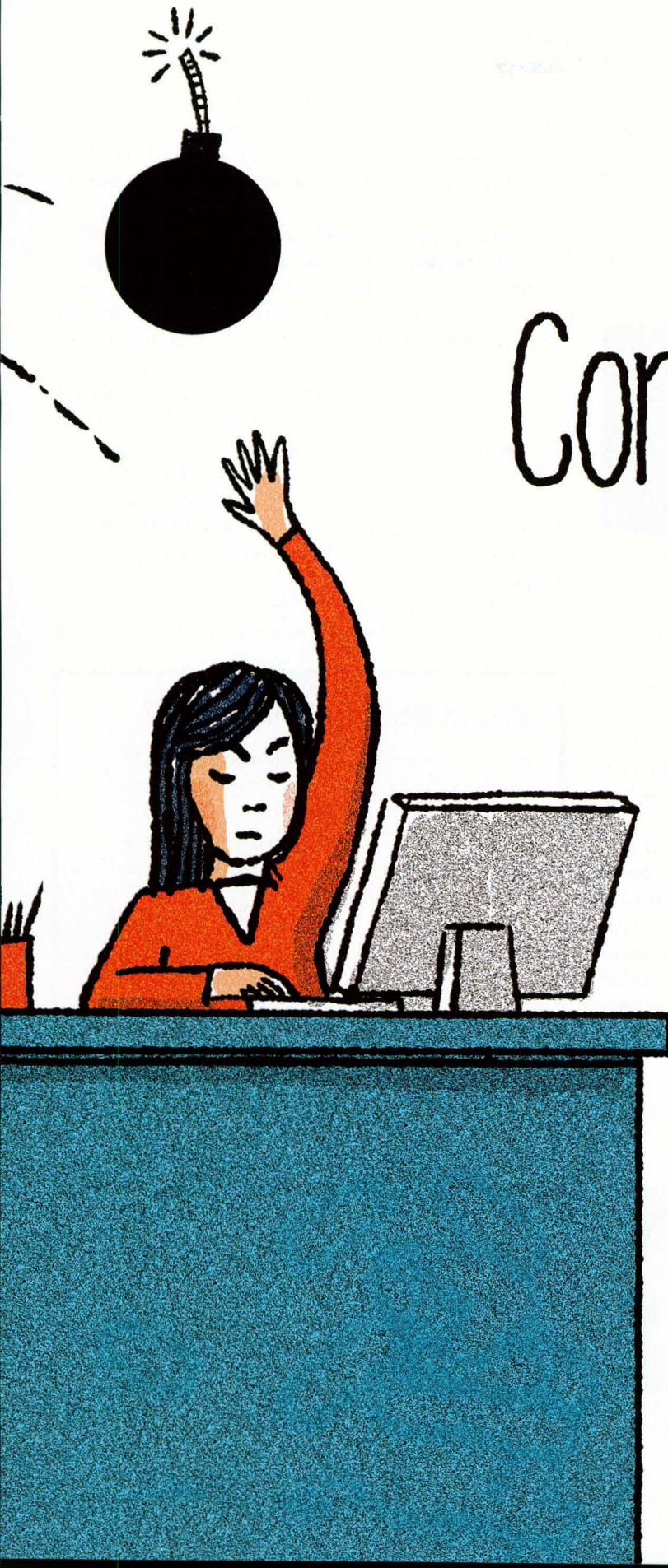






Confronting Conflict

Conflict isn't necessarily a bad thing.
But ignoring it can be.

By Tamara Lytle

At a hospital, employee conflicts can happen amid life-or-death situations. No one benefits when these conflicts are ignored—not the staff, not the managers and certainly not the patients.

While it's a natural human tendency to avoid uncomfortable conflict with others, that tactic won't work in the long term.

"It's like a crazy song you can't get out of your head," says Dan Bjerknes, director of HR operations at Catholic Health Initiatives/Mercy Medical Center in Williston, N.D., who has a master's degree in counseling and previously worked as a conflict management consultant.

By the time a clash comes to HR's attention, it's often too late—such as when a valuable employee is quitting. Even seemingly small conflicts can be important because they're often really about larger issues. »

Workplace conflicts happen everywhere, and ignoring them can be costly. Every unaddressed conflict wastes about eight hours of company time in gossip and other unproductive activities, says Joseph Grenny, co-founder of VitalSmarts, a training and organizational development company in Provo, Utah. Now multiply that by all the issues not being resolved.

"It's an enormous drain on an organization," says Grenny, co-author of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (McGraw-Hill, 2011).

Understanding the reasons behind workplace conflicts can help HR professionals tackle problems before—or after—a conflict turns into a face-off between departments that refuse to work together or a screaming match between colleagues.

A good place to start is by realizing that, even though people may shy away from it, conflict is actually normal and healthy. In fact, many believe it's a vital ingredient to organizational success. Experts have found that the most effective teams are those in which members feel safe enough to disagree with one another. A culture where dissent is allowed, or even encouraged, can spur innovation, diversity of thought and better decision-making.

"Conflict suggests the way you've been doing things is not the way it's going to be forever," says Casey Swartz, HR manager at CTLGroup in Skokie, Ill. "You don't want to hire a bunch of clones."

According to Michael Woodward, an organizational psychologist in the New York City area, the challenge is in figuring out which conflicts are healthy and which ones are harmful. "Unhealthy conflict is when it becomes personal and emotional. Then your judgment gets clouded," Woodward says. By contrast, good conflict can lead to higher levels of trust. If people see that it's OK to challenge the boss, they can question the status quo, which is better for the company.

Beneath the Surface

Difference is at the heart of conflict, so it's important to explore areas where people often don't align.

Conflicting priorities. Some fights are over resources such as budgets; others erupt from incompatible goals or reactions to structural change in the company.

At Black Butte Coal Co. in southwest Wyoming, a warehouse supervisor and a maintenance manager were clashing so severely over policies and procedures that they were frequently yelling at each other. The fights worsened until the two departments didn't want to work together, recalls



Casey Swartz

Amanda DeBernardi, SHRM-CP, the company's HR manager.

In fact, the feuding parties' manager was ready to fire them both. Both had strong goals for their departments but had lost sight of the bigger picture of what was good for the company, DeBernardi says.

She found help in Grenny's book on difficult conversations. She sat the warehouse supervisor and maintenance manager in a conference room with a blank piece of paper in front of them. Each person had his say without interruption as the other took notes rather than presenting a different side of the story. DeBernardi used a white board to categorize the problems and pressed both to brainstorm solutions. The employees aren't exactly lunch buddies now, but the process worked. DeBernardi's only regret is not mediating the situation sooner.

"The key thing is the participants knowing they are responsible for the results and they are the ones developing the solution," she says. "I'm here to facilitate, and that's all I will do." She estimates that she spends at least 30 percent of her time dealing with workplace conflicts.

Many fights over resources can be avoided when people perceive that they are operating in an environment of plenty—in

When Should HR Step In?

HR professionals and conflict management experts recommend that HR get involved in workplace conflicts when:

- Employees are threatening to quit over the problem. Recruiting and training are expensive; it's often cheaper to work out a solution.
- Disagreements are getting personal, and respect between employees is being lost.
- Conflicts are affecting morale and organizational success.

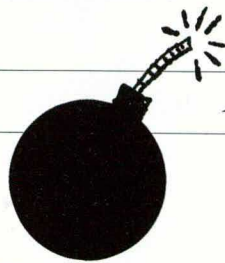
other words, where everyone has what they need to operate effectively, says Lindred Greer, assistant professor of organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business. Note that the key is creating the *perception* of abundance—so solutions are possible even when acquiring more resources is not an option. Thinking creatively is one way to do this. For example, if two departments are fighting over a small training budget, HR might offer to conduct in-house training so both can benefit.

Conflicting perspectives. In an increasingly global and diverse workplace, sometimes the heart of the problem is that people differ from each other in age, gender, ethnicity or personality type.

That's something Marcia Reynolds, an organizational psychiatrist with Arizona-based Covisioning LLC, has witnessed.



Amanda DeBernardi



10 Steps to Resolving Conflict

1. Schedule a meeting to address the problem, preferably at a neutral place.
2. Set ground rules. Ask all parties to treat each other with respect and to make an effort to listen and understand others' views.
3. Ask each participant to describe the conflict, including desired changes. Direct participants to use "I" statements, not "you" statements. They should focus on specific behaviors and problems rather than people.
4. Ask participants to restate what others have said.
5. Summarize the conflict based on what you have heard and obtain agreement from participants.
6. Brainstorm solutions. Discuss all of the options in a positive manner. Rule out any options that participants agree are unworkable.
7. Summarize all possible options for a solution.
8. Assign further analysis of each option to individual participants.
9. Make sure all parties agree on the next steps.
10. Close the meeting by asking participants to shake hands, apologize and thank each other for working to resolve the conflict.

Source: Society for Human Resource Management.

To get a sense of how diverse perspectives color people's perceptions, she asked leaders at a global company she was consulting with to participate in an activity in which they were blindfolded and asked to describe the puzzle pieces in their hands. She observed as people gave descriptions so different that they couldn't figure out they were holding the same piece.

"Conflict is inevitable because we're human beings and come from different backgrounds," Reynolds says. That's why organizations need to remember to bring people together to get to know each other, she points out.

Brian Scala, an HR administrator, repeatedly saw generational clashes in his job at Vince and Associates Clinical Research Inc. in Overland Park, Kan. The Baby Boomers and members of Generation X saw the Millennials as lazy with poor work ethics, while the Millennials viewed their older colleagues as less adaptable to change.

In one instance, two lab workers from different generations who performed the same job came to HR complaining about each

other. The Baby Boomer had taken notes on when her younger colleague was showing up in the morning and complained about the quality of his work. He called her overbearing and inflexible in trying new approaches.

"A lightbulb went off for us on how to get these people to work together," Scala says.

HR set up a new system that uses checklists to show the contributions of each person, which helped the Boomer to recognize her colleague's accomplishments. As a result of that conflict, HR also developed a mentorship program that pairs Millennials with older workers, enabling younger workers to gain a better understanding of the value of older colleagues' experience.

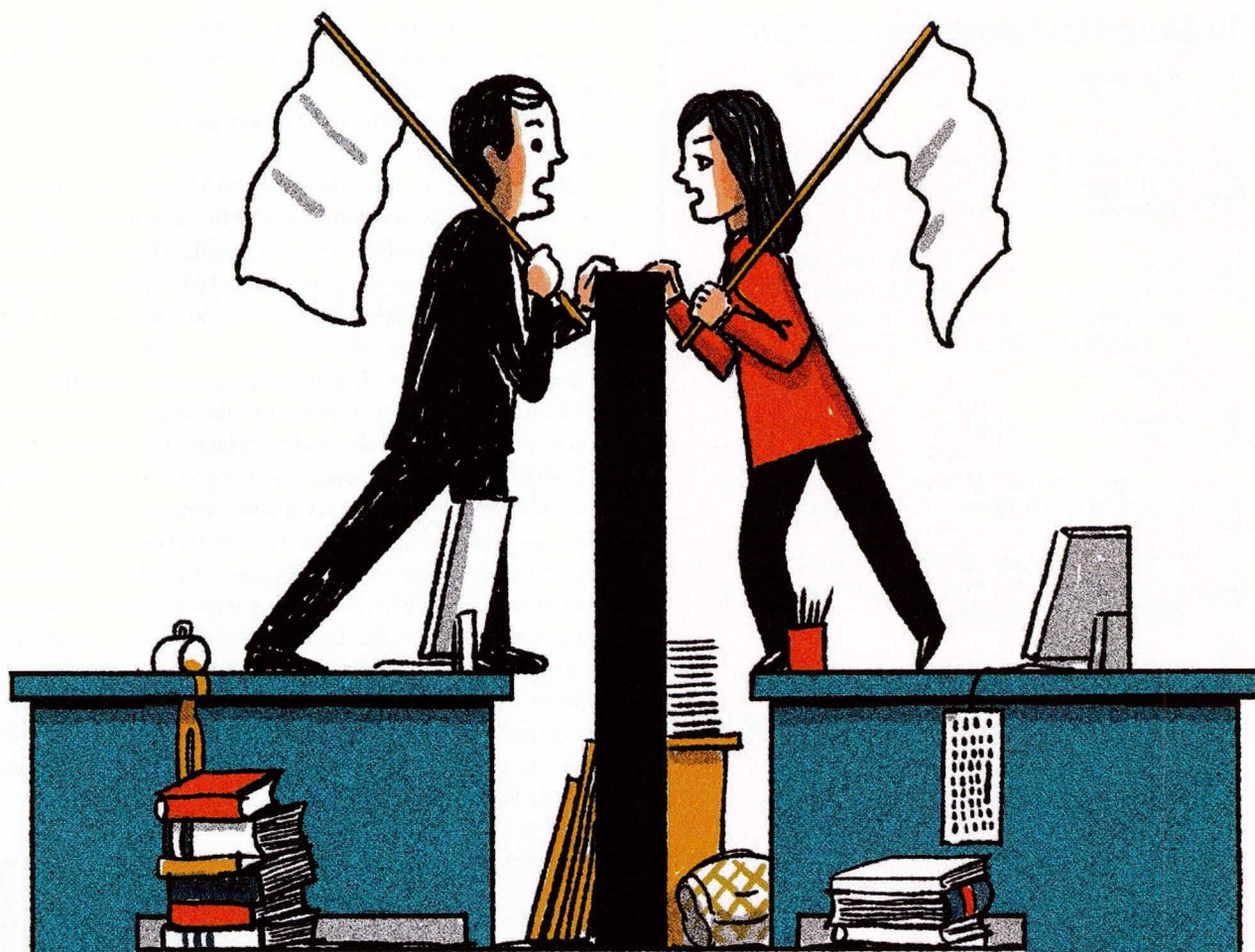
A recent Society for Human Resource Management survey found that 72 percent of employees rank "respectful treatment of all employees at all levels" as the top factor in job satisfaction.

Conflicting assumptions. One of the biggest drivers of conflict is when people misinterpret others' intentions. The introvert who stays quiet during an entire meeting and brings up a problem at the end is not trying to sabotage a co-worker; that behavior simply aligns with his personality type. A change in seating arrangements in the office isn't a personal attack on someone, just a reorganization that may not have been thought through. Someone who's not acting according to a person's stereotyped expectations—like a woman who's very assertive and thus behaves in a way that contradicts traditional notions of femininity—may just be being herself. >

When Should You Seek Outside Help?

While it's better to address workplace conflicts as soon as possible and at a local level, sometimes you need outside help from a mediator, arbitrator or attorney. Experts say those situations include the following:

- When potential legal issues are involved, such as allegations of discrimination or harassment.
- When the HR department doesn't have the time or training to provide the conflict resolution assistance needed.
- When there are patterns of recurring issues.
- When the flare-ups are becoming abusive or resemble bullying.
- When a manager needs retraining that can't be done in-house.
- When the environment is so toxic it's time to get everyone offsite so the office doesn't trigger continuing negative responses.



Too often, people think that “anything in disagreement with my belief is intended as a personal affront,” Woodward says. “We like to ascribe meaning to everything that happens. But we often confuse our interpretations about the beliefs of others with their actual intent. We’re all self-centered that way.”

Moreover, telling people not to take conflicts personally won’t work. Regardless of any such disclaimers, people take things personally about 70 percent of the time, according to a meta-analysis of many surveys by Greer, the Stanford professor.

But what may help is to simply acknowledge people’s feelings, according to Reynolds, author of *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs* (Berrett-Koehler, 2014). For example, if someone was irate that his project wasn’t chosen for funding, the author would say: “It sounds like you feel like it’s a decision about you personally.”

Conflicting tolerances. Conflict experts and HR practitioners say employees have differing levels of comfort with addressing conflict. Too often, discomfort causes conflicts to be avoided entirely. And that’s not good.

Conflict avoidance can lead to real blowups when one person can’t hold it in any longer. Dani Kimlinger, SHRM-SCP, an HR and organizational psychology leader at the business psychology firm MINES & Associates in Littleton, Colo., recalls how colleagues in adjoining cubicles at a bank were locked in a silent battle for six months. The woman felt her turf was being invaded but wouldn’t talk about it—or anything else—with the man next door who was causing her consternation. She rolled her eyes at him in meetings, making him feel disrespected. When she finally lit into him, she felt that he should already know what was wrong—but he didn’t.

In counseling the woman, Kimlinger instructed her to start small, by saying good morning to the man. Conflict resolution generally works about 80 percent of the time, Kimlinger says, but in this case, it didn’t. The woman ended up leaving the company after conflicts with other people.

At a previous employer, Swartz coached a manager with an employee who felt micromanaged. She suggested that the manager set up a weekly report that would allow the worker to keep

the boss informed on what he was doing without constantly being peppered with questions.

Almost everyone has some conflict they're avoiding. In his book, Grenny defines a "crucial conversation" as one that has high stakes, with emotion involved and in which people are likely to disagree.

Studies show that increased productivity and engagement are correlated with the shortness of time between identifying a problem and discussing it.

"If you don't talk it out, you act it out," Grenny warns.

Encouraging Trust

Creating a culture of trust is a crucial job for HR. "Try to make sure when people come to you [the issue] doesn't just disappear," Swartz says. Below are some tips for building trust, encouraging good conflict, and preventing or addressing the bad kind:

Survey employees. Swartz conducts annual engagement surveys and has loads of conversations with employees in the interim. Each year, Bjerknes also surveys employees about how well conflict is being handled at the medical center. The results identify departments that have widespread problems so he knows where training and intervention are needed.

Catch people doing things right. Woodward tells managers to seek out opportunities to acknowledge and praise employees. Doing so creates an environment where people feel comfortable bringing up problems.

Welcome dissent. Managers should encourage dissent that's focused on tasks, strategies and mission. Sometimes a retreat with an outside facilitator is the best way to get beyond surface conversations.

Create diverse teams. Create work teams whose members have diverse expertise, ways of thinking and backgrounds.

Related Reading

- *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Penguin Books, 2011) by Roger Fisher, William L. Ury and Bruce Patton.
- *Fish!: A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* (Hyperion, 2000) by Stephen C. Lundin, Harry Paul and John Christensen.
- *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs* (Berrett-Koehler, 2014) by Marcia Reynolds.
- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes Are High* (McGraw-Hill, 2011) by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler.

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Appointing a rotating devil's advocate is a good way to stir up productive conflict.

Create accountability. This is a conflict prophylactic, since many fights arise from a lack of clarity over who has the final authority to make a decision. Making sure that roles are well-established and communicated prevents problems from arising.

Encourage people to manage their own conflicts. Tell employees to work out conflict at the level it happens, instead of pushing it up the organizational chain. Doing so will give people confidence that they are capable of handling these issues on their own. "It doesn't help the culture of our organization if I drop in and fix the problem and get back out," Bjerknes says. "We have 500 employees. It's not possible for me to fix all the problems."

After people address their own conflicts, the manager or department leader should follow up to make sure not only that the immediate problem has been solved but also that the root cause has been addressed, Grenny says.

Provide training. HR can help people learn the skills they need to handle conflict by sending them to courses or recommending helpful books. Conflicts tend to become emotionally fraught when someone chooses not to focus on the issue at hand but rather to question another person's competency, autonomy or integrity. Bjerknes advises people to choose the right time to have a difficult conversation and to prepare in advance the three most important things they want to say about the conflict.

"My objective is to be a good coach," he says. "At the end of the day, the coach is not out there playing. You hope they will use the things you've taught them." ■

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