

THE CONFLICT EXTINGUISHER

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

911 for Hot Solutions for Workplace Discord

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IN ACCORD
Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

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Conflict Suppression ≠ Conflict Resolution

That was uncomfortable. You just witnessed a perfect example of the growing discord between two key staff; Mike's barbed comment to Paulette triggered her stony silence and unwillingness to make eye contact with him for the remainder of the meeting. This can't be safely denied anymore, but what's a manager to do? Some supervisors issue edicts saying, in essence: "Behave, get along and get back to work." The goal these managers aspire to is a more congenial atmosphere where people focus on their work.

Managers should set parameters for how employees treat each other. Clarifying what's unacceptable is part of your role and it helps people understand the rules. However, when this is all that's done, it can force the conflict into hiding rather than resolve it. While some underground conflicts will quietly dissipate, others can fester and erode employee effectiveness or become an overt conflagration.

A more nuanced response to conflict among coworkers is to find out how it affects people, why it has erupted, and what they need to navigate out of their interpersonal dysfunction. Among the concerns I have about conflict suppression is its failure to recognize

that the process to reach resolution matters. One can imagine a scenario in which Mike and Paulette get their needs met through a directive from above.

For example, you decide to divvy up the workload they were fighting over and separate their work space. But, experience shows that if the involved employees' voices are squelched in the process, then the solution can be a hollow victory without real buy-in or long-term compliance from the employees. The act of discussing and negotiating through problems and creating solutions builds the trust and good will necessary for improved working relationships, especially in the face of historically damaging conflict. A corollary benefit is that employees learn how to resolve future problems by understanding more about each other and gain skills to work through new issues.

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Tired of conflict wrecking relationships, wasting time and destroying productivity?

Conflict Suppression *(continued)*

The reason many managers prefer the “just get along” approach is that the alternative, directly managing the conflict, can dredge up hard feelings and highlight tensions. But one cannot have authentic conflict resolution without the presence of some conflict. We have to be pre-pared to explore the problem in order to create lasting solutions based on what is discovered within the soupy mess of discord.

Most people naturally prefer to work in low-conflict environments. If you are willing to enter the fray as a resolver, rather than issuing broad decrees, then you can help feuding staff work together and solve the real problem. Not sure how? Stay tuned to *The Conflict Extinguisher* for tips to be more confident and effective.

Upcoming In-Accord Events

- Sept. 12** Presenting “*Fixing the Outrageous Cost of Conflict*” to the Columbia Gorge Human Resource Management Association’s Employee Relations S.I.G. 8:30am – 10:30am. 400 E Scenic Drive, The Dalles, OR. Open to PHRMA members.
- Oct. 15** IMC ORSWW Presentation at the Multnomah Athletic Club. 7:00am – 9:00am. Woo hoo! It’s going to be a party!

Perspective

The star Betelgeuse, in the upper left corner of Orion, is massive. If you tried to fill its volume by pouring 100 earths per second into it you’d pour for 30,000 years.