

in the trenches:
dealing with
office warfare

By Karen Choy-Xavier

Office conflicts are bad news for corporate performance, but by acting quickly and mediating leaders can settle things peacefully and get people back on track.

It can start quietly: a negative remark in a meeting, an email that comes across the wrong way, or a procedural change that somebody is not notified about. However they start, and the list of possibilities is endless, office conflicts among team members can (at best) create a hostile, negative work environment, or (at worst) hurt business performance, resulting in a loss of focus and missed goals. Effective leaders are adept at spotting conflicts before they become unmanageable, resolving them in a way that saves face for the feuding parties involved, and renews the team's focus on long term objectives.

“The skill of CEOs and senior managers to create a vision that everyone in the company can identify with and be motivated and excited by is critically important,” says Mohanbir Sawhney, a leading professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. “Leaders are evangelists more than

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anything else, and need to constantly align people's and the business's activities toward the larger goal. Infusing the organization with a sense of purpose and a mission that is larger than profits is very important, because it will motivate people, and that, in turn, will determine your ability to retain good people; thus, ultimately, it will determine your organization's success in the market place."

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Office conflicts have the potential to sabotage achieving the long term goals Sawhney speaks of. Such conflicts have several tell tale signs. It can take the form of persistent squabbling between two team members, perhaps even extending to blatant put down remarks, aimed not at resolving issues, but at diminishing a rival's self esteem and confidence. It can take the form of regularly criticizing another team member, both openly or covertly to other colleagues. Office conflict can be conducted underground, with two team members ignoring each other and limiting interaction to the bare minimum. Irrespective of the nature the conflict takes, the leader's role is to play the role of both mediator and evangelist, helping people move beyond squabbles and refocus on business objectives.

Leaders really have no choice but to get involved; interpersonal conflicts are difficult for people to resolve themselves. It is human nature to avoid addressing issues, letting problems simmer resentfully beneath the surface, poisoning the attitudes of the people involved, and eventually spreading to more team members. Office conflicts tend to fall in a few key areas: over facts (a basic misunderstanding that can be easily resolved), over process and methods (people agree on objectives, but not how they should be attained), over purpose (people have different goals), and over ideals (people have different beliefs and principles). Of these four, differences over ideals are the most difficult to resolve.

For a leader to step in effectively, he must take a consultative approach, listening to the issue from both perspectives, identifying common ground between both view points. It is important to frame the discussion not in terms of various points of difference, but the long-term objectives of the team, where success is an equally desirable outcome for all team members.

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In a conflict resolution meeting the leader needs to sit down with both parties and describe the counter productive behavior that has been observed, stressing how this behavior will impact the team's performance. Then, the leader needs to get each person to describe their grievance in detail. Following this, leaders need to have both employees describe the other's point of view, and then identify specific points of agreement and disagreement. Having listened to this, the leader should ask the two team members for ideas on how to proceed.

This process will help both employees see the common ground they share – often, they will be surprised to learn how much they have in common. It will also help them take ownership of the problem and see that there are long-term benefits for resolving the issue. The leader can help outline the steps both parties need to take, with success more likely if both parties make small concessions from the very outset, thus saving face for both. For all this to succeed, however, it is imperative that a leader spot the problem early and act decisively to resolve it.

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Resolving Office Conflicts

- Act quickly when the signs of a conflict emerge.
- Sit down with the warring parties and outline why it is in their long-term interest to resolve their differences.
- Listen as they outline their grievances.
- Have both parties summarize the other party's point of view, encouraging them to note points of common ground.
- Encourage both sides to make some face-saving concessions, and get agreement on the steps both parties need to take to resolve the conflict.

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