



## **MOVING YOUR TEAM FROM CONFLICT TO COLLABORATION**

When I mention the word “conflict” during my training seminars and individual business coaching sessions, people tend to recoil, grimace and moan. They hold their heads, support their stomachs and slouch. The energy in the room sinks. Except, that is, when the people happen to be attorneys. With attorneys, I’m more likely to find a few eyes gleaming, posture improving and small smiles emerging. Why the difference? As attorneys, we thrive on managing conflicts. It is an integral part of what we’re about from the first day of law school when our Property professor goes on a sarcastic tirade (“Where do you think you are – cooking school!”) So asking an attorney to avoid conflict is like asking a police officer to avoid dark alleys – it can’t, and shouldn’t, be done.

However, there is a danger that those same conflict resolution methods that inure to the benefit of countless clients, will be destructive when applied to the people on our own team, i.e. attorneys and support professionals within our firms. The serious detrimental effects of such conflict include resentment, stress, low morale and reduced productivity. How can we prevent the negative repercussions of conflict internally while remaining driven, forceful advocates for our clients?

The answer lies in behavioral flexibility. Imagine you are engaged in tense contract negotiations with opposing counsel. You are both in a “Competing” conflict resolution mode, each pursuing an I Win / You Lose outcome. Finally, the negotiations are concluded and you hoist the heavy file, leave the conference room and re-enter the office. You’re frazzled and worn, trying to digest the implications of the negotiation. Just then a paralegal and a legal secretary approach, unloading lots of new information and posing complex questions about another case. Here is the moment of truth: how will you react? Will your eyes focus on these people, what story will your facial expression tell, what type of words will emerge, what tone of voice will fill the silence? Will the confrontational nature of the negotiation spill over into this brand new interaction?

There are several conflict-resolution modes. The ability to shift quickly from “Competing” to “Collaborating” or maybe even “Accommodating”, is a skill that takes practice. It takes an awareness of these different modes of communication and knowledge about which circumstances call for which method. Even more challenging, you need to assess how particular individuals will respond to each method. The importance of acquiring this skill goes much deeper than the simple maxim “it’s nice to

be nice”, as was quoted by a Judge when I was sworn in to the Federal bar. Not only is how we treat people a moral issue, which it is, but it can be a business survival issue. Conflict-ridden work environments directly effect how the other professionals on your team perceive their jobs, how motivated they are, and what messages they send to the public about your law firm. Accordingly, more law firms are recognizing the importance of creating collaborative office environments and devoting resources to achieving that goal.

There are four simple behaviors that you can adopt which will help create and maintain a collaborative work environment:

- 1) **Good listening skills.** Listening is the key to good relationships. Even though most of us are never formally taught how to listen well, we can learn “active listening skills”. Practicing these skills is an investment that pays off by building rapport and improving client service. One such skill is paraphrasing, which is repeating in your own words what you think you have heard. This tells the speaker that you have stepped out of your own viewpoint to try to understand the speaker’s point of view. When we listen to understand rather than simply to reply, we have engaged in meaningful, empathic communication.
- 2) **Strong non-verbal communication skills.** If you think about the word “OK”, you will find that this simple word can have significantly different meanings depending on whether it is expressed in anger, boredom, or with enthusiasm. By heightening awareness of your non-verbal communication you will enhance the impact of your verbal messages. For example, when you say “thanks a lot for your help” looking and sounding like you mean it, the recipient will feel sincerely thanked. If you utter the words while distracted or low energy, you’ve wasted your breath.
- 3) **Constructive feedback.** Feedback can be delivered in a confrontational way that is destructive, or it can be delivered in a collaborative manner much more likely to yield results. Constructive feedback is directed to particular behavior, and is not directed to the person behind the behavior. For example, “there were three typing errors in that brief” is feedback that is appropriately directed to the problem behavior. “You can be so sloppy sometimes!” is feedback that is inappropriately directed to the person him/herself. Feedback should be given privately and in a timely fashion, not delivered publicly or as shocking news at an annual performance review.
- 4) **Acknowledgment.** So many professionals who work in legal environments lament that they are ignored until the moment they are needed. In our busy, pre-occupied days we forget or don’t realize the humiliation of being disregarded, the embarrassment of not being introduced to a client who enters the room or the slight of being passed in the hallway as if invisible. While a paycheck is certainly a form of acknowledgment, people need more than that: they need to be told in a more human way that they are valued as competent professionals.

All of these behaviors add up to creating a respectful workplace. One in which the conflict inherent in legal work does not spill inside the office, damaging the very people who comprise your own team. A more collaborative and respectful internal team will strengthen your ability to manage the conflict that awaits you outside.

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