

HoA; it held that the difficulty facing any third party attempting to determine these matters was such that the HoA had to be regarded as “in the nature of a progress report” rather than an enforceable contract.

The majority also, however, overturned the High Court’s finding that ECNZ had breached a “best endeavours” clause in the HoA. Such clauses were held to be enforceable only in respect of negotiations of “relative simplicity and predictability”. In respect of a complex contractual negotiation, Justice Blanchard said that it was “impossible for a Court to define... what [the parties] ought to have done in order to reach agreement”.

Temporary structures

And in Gisborne Logistical Solutions Ltd was prosecuted by OSH, and fined \$6,600, after a worker suffered serious injuries when an 800kg component of a steel structure collapsed on to him. The company was found guilty of failing to take all practicable steps to ensure the employee was not harmed while dismantling the heavy 3m-high structure. Murray Thomson, OSH Service Manager for Hawke’s Bay, says that the accident could have been prevented if the beams in the structure had been supported and braced. “This latest fine shows that businesses must take their obligations under the Health and Safety in Employment Act seriously”, he said. “All employees have the right to return home safely at the end of a day.” For further information contact Madeleine Setchell, Madeleine.setchell@osh.govt.nz



Dealing with Conflict

MARTIN RINGER looks at ways of defusing the tension in conflicted teams.

BEING a member of a team that is working well can be one of the best possible experiences in the workplace. There is something really satisfying about being in a group of people who are moving together towards a goal, supporting and appreciating each other along the way. But when teams go sour, going to work can feel like a punishment and working on your own starts to look pretty attractive.

So now to look at what happens in conflicted work teams and what can be done. I work on the following assumptions:

- it is normal for people in conflicted teams to have strong feelings
- people act to protect themselves
- teams get conflicted in predictable stages – it doesn’t all happen at once
- people’s ways of dealing with the problem often make it worse
- failure to address conflict early can lead to additional problems
- there is hope!

There are some simple ways of starting the healing process, but no “quick fix” solutions to turn conflicted teams into happy and harmonious teams.

Strong feelings are normal

Typical feelings experienced by people whose team has gone awry are:

- **anger** about loss of quality of their work environment and the stupidity of the conflict
- **fear** of losing territory, prestige, self-esteem, money, security and friendships
- **helplessness** that they can’t solve the problem and nobody else seems to be able to

- **loss of hope** that it will ever improve or the job ever be satisfying again
- **frustration** that management (or others) haven’t acted with a firm hand to sort out the mess
- **stress, intolerance and impatience** about all sorts of things that used not to be a problem – the fuse gets shorter
- **feeling bad** about themselves and others because of all of the above
- **shame** on the part of managers and team leaders that they couldn’t sort the problem out, and sometimes **fear** that they will get punished.

People act to protect themselves

Once the conflict has been going on for a while, the work place can seem like an unsafe place to be, because support among team members has gone. Some of the ways that people behave in these circumstances are:

- to **isolate** themselves from others and try to work more on their own
- to **stop talking** to each other, except about how much they don’t like the conflict
- to **blame** one or more people for causing the conflict without considering other possibilities
- to spend more **energy on the conflict** than on the work of the team
- to focus on the **impression that they are making** in the hope that this makes them less likely to get fired if management takes drastic action
- to find reasons for **not coming to work**, working away from the workplace, or being late
- to **react more strongly** to all sorts of things that used not to bother them too much

Trouble brews gradually

Everyone knows when trouble is on the horizon. If nothing is done, the trouble gets worse. The worst-case scenario is something like this:

- friction and tension between two or more members begins
- the team becomes less effective at doing its job
- team members get frustrated and lose trust in each other so people get really cautious with each other
- team members take sides: they “line up” behind the people who started fighting
- feelings rise and open hostility starts
- members lose faith in the team and blame one or more of the people involved or the management (or both)
- the team fragments and stops working altogether
- someone else is called in to clean up the mess, or team members resign, go on extended leave, request transfers and generally do everything they can to avoid being in such an unpleasant environment
- sometimes the organisation does away with the team altogether, and everybody concerned loses their jobs.

People's solutions can make the problem worse

For example, the behaviours listed above (like withdrawing, blaming others and focusing on impressing the management) all make it harder for the team to function anyway. Many people in conflicted teams want someone else to change or leave. But one person cannot make another person change or leave.

Failure to address conflict early can lead to other problems

Whilst it can be very difficult to address conflict, my experience is that not doing so leads to “secondary trauma.” A parallel comes to mind: When a chronic injury such as a damaged knee is not treated, our whole body re-adjusts so as to avoid creating pain in the injured joint. Compensations such as limping put strain on other parts of the body, such as the hip joints. After a time the hip becomes damaged, and remains injured even when the knee is treated. Unaddressed conflict in organisations creates similar secondary effects; the courage to act quickly can prevent major collateral damage. For example, people in adjoining teams become fearful for their own teams and hence cautious with each other, bureaucracies are introduced with the rationale of avoiding conflict and so on. In some cases the poison that is created in severely conflicted relationships spreads throughout the organisation as a kind of “relationship septicaemia” that remains long after the original conflict has been dealt with.

There is hope!

Two questions that team members need to ask themselves (in private) are “What are my actions doing to keep the conflict going?” and “What can I do – without giving up on myself – that might help to lessen the conflict?”

Useful questions that many people overlook are: “What is the smallest change that would need to happen for me to be satisfied?” and “How would I know if that change had happened; what would be the direct evidence?”

Looking at the whole team's functioning, you could also ask “What has happened in the organisation so far that has made the situation

worse?” and conversely, “What has happened in the organisation so far that has made the situation better?”

A powerful technique for locating the core interpersonal problems is based on two well-supported principles. The first is that we most dislike in *others* what we most dislike in *ourselves*. The second is that we most dislike in *others* what we *ourselves* most fear being like or becoming.

A simple (though painful) technique for re-owning these disowned aspects of self is to identify the key attributes or characteristics that we dislike or even hate in our opponents and say to ourselves “I, too, am like that!” If we ourselves can start to tolerate the possibility that we have (or fear having) the characteristics of the person whom we dislike so much then we no longer need to put so much energy into pushing this other person away or fighting him or her.

To conclude, managing or resolving conflict calls on *everyone involved to really look closely at their own patterns of communication and interaction with a view to adopting new behaviours*. This is threatening and exciting at the same time. Many conflicted teams get through very difficult times and as a result the individuals and the team as a whole become stronger through their active participation in the process of dealing with personally challenging issues. Your team can too, if each person is willing to look at their part in the system that generates the difficulty.

We all need to stay curious about our own part in the conflict – even if we don't think we're directly involved.

Note: My new book “Group Action: The Dynamics of Groups in Therapeutic, Educational and Corporate Settings” includes a full explanation of some of the more “psychological” principles outlined above. It is published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers (London) and can be ordered from any bookshop. (ISBN 1 84310 028 2 – available for delivery in January 2002)

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