

WHEN PASSIONS RUN DEEP: THE HIDDEN COST OF CONFLICT

Jackie Keddy and Clive Johnson

Rumblings of discontent in the team may be furthest from the minds of forward-looking companies that are on the rise, but failing to take notice of the potential for disputes to blow up at any time may prove to be a costly mistake, not least when change and growth are a part of the mix. What's more, opportunities to innovate and harness powerful emotion may be lost if *healthy* conflict isn't recognized and channeled effectively.

In this first part of a series of three articles by conflict specialists Jackie Keddy and Clive Johnson (co-authors of *Managing Conflict at Work* and founders of the *International Conflict Management Forum*, the UK's leading network for sharing learnings on work-based conflict) explain why conflict is relevant for anyone who runs a business, leads a team or works with colleagues, and show where organisation's approaches to keeping the lid on unhelpful conflict often go awry.

Recent research suggests that conflict resolution costs UK businesses close to £40 billion each year [1], not to mention the adverse publicity, poorly channeled energy and additional pressures that ineffectively managed conflicts produce, often leading to work-driven sickness for the aggrieved and 'accused' alike.

Meantime, it's been revealed that the cost of mental health to organisations exceeds £25 billion each year [2] whilst *Professional Manager* reports that employment tribunals have increased by 43% in the past year [3] and levels of staff satisfaction are similarly disappointing, with a survey just completed reporting that 47% of our colleagues aren't happy with their lot [4].

Some of the reason for this great expanse of discontent is of course rooted in the tough decisions that many companies are facing at the moment. Tempers are frayed, fear of job losses adds pressure to work long hours and 'perform', and back-stabbers are at large.

"Not a problem around here", you might say, but more often than not, it's not just those who are visibly anxious or already complaining who number amongst the disenchanted, but the apparently quiet and unruffled may be harboring mounting frustration and discontentment.

The roots of conflict are usually very simple. For one thing, humankind is naturally predisposed to engage in conflict. Some biologists even argue that conflict is in our genes - to survive, our ancestors needed the protection of their tribe and a readiness and skill to fight. Capture by another tribe represented an everyday threat, whilst strength in the group made it easier to protect territory and the resources it provided for survival.

Echoes of the same tribal instincts that enabled our ancestors to survive are still seen today amongst supporters of football teams and in the pride individuals often take in their national identity. As for the notion of ‘survival of the fittest’, humans are of course pass masters at gaining ‘one over’ each other, albeit some more forcefully than others. A ‘dog eat dog’ philosophy rules in many boardrooms and going one-upmanship is a preoccupation for many.

Unfortunately, the same qualities that are often upheld as being ones to admire at work are ones, which can be turned to setting expectations of personal ‘rights’ and a need to stand against perceived aggressors and the bullies that often lurk in the midst (not always a belief that ‘arrogance is good’, but often not a far cry from it).

Then there’s the ‘maturity-immaturity’ dilemma – the tendency in many organizations for the workplace stifles rather than offers such opportunities for what writers such as Abraham Maslow, Argyris, and McGregor suggest is a need for humans to seek fulfillment or achieve ‘self actualization’.

Faced with the frustration to satisfy a basic need, Richard Arvid Johnson suggests that employees may ‘respond to organizational pressures and threats by defensive reactions such as aggression against their supervisors and co-workers, fixated behaviour or apathy, compromise and gamesmanship, or psychological withdrawal and daydreaming. All of these defense mechanisms reduce a person's potential for creative, constructive activity on the job’ (Johnson, 1978).

Finally, the way in which human beings absorb and make sense of information from and via the external, biological, physiological and mental worlds often leads to surprising reasons why people perceive themselves to be under threat, discriminated against or have some other basis for grievance.

All in all, there are many possible triggers that can help kindle a dispute, including suspicion and conspiracy theories, and genuine but unrecognized psychological disorders, such as obsessions and paranoia.

Of course the upheaval and uncertainty of going through change, when people’s roles may need to adapt, levels of management come or go, and some become displaced is a powerful scenario for conflict to arise, not just amongst those who fear what may happen but also for those who sense an opportunity to position themselves for new roles.

A failing amongst leaders to adapt during a period of rapid growth can be a problem too, as we’ll see in the case of one of the organizations whose painful experience of dealing with conflict we’ll consider in the next article in this series. This is the time when what started as loose structures for operating a business may need to be tightened, responsibilities delegated and (possibly) the wishes of ever more demanding investors attended to.

Inevitable questions may arise about which direction to head next, as well as disagreements over whether the decisions that have been taken are right. At the same time, there can no longer be a place for uncertain responsibilities on the board when businesses expand, laissez-faire partnerships need to produce clear leaders and agreement over who is accountable for what.

Through all of this, there's potential for fallout. Silos form, rivals may bite their tongues but begin to nurture long-term grudges, and open communication can quickly break down.

Of course it doesn't have to be this way. By understanding the various ingredients that can give unhealthy conflict life – by understanding what we call the *anatomy* of conflict – much can be done to stop the seeds of disagreements that may spiral into bitter and costly disputes taking root. What's more the type of conflict that is needed for ideas to spark, healthy competition to thrive and 'iron to sharpen iron' can be a vital driver for any organisation's success. We'll turn our attention to what can be done in the rest of this series.

NOTE: The nature and causes of conflict are more fully described in Jackie and Clive's new book, [Managing Conflict at Work](#) (find out more at www.managingconflictatwork.com, where the authors also reflect in a series of podcasts and videos on why good conflict management matters in organisations).

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References:

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[4] <http://www.thehrdirector.com/hrnews/half-uk-workforce-hunting-for-new-job-204>, accessed 23/09/10.