Dear Managers: Conflict in the Workplace Should not be Feared

By: Shannon Moldaver M.A., LL.B., LL.M (ADR), Shannon Moldaver Dispute Resolution Inc.

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You are well aware that your bench strength is paramount. You may have "the best" IT person or "the best" Operations Manager but all of that advantage can be quickly undermined by friction within your team. In many great pieces like "Focus on well-being helps companies keep employees" in the Globe & Mail, we learn about the importance of time to nurture ourselves, talk about mental health, exercise, and about being conscious of the importance of diversity but perhaps we should add to the list the need to shift our paradigm about conflict in the workplace. It is here to stay and no longer needs to be the elephant in the room.

In case you don't, please know that, at any given time in your department, someone is disgruntled. They may be upset with you or with someone else in the department. The conflict may bubble up into a full-blown dispute known to you or it may lie below the surface, sometimes naturally dissipating into nothingness while other times quietly festering and poisoning the work environment. Conflict in the workplace is like carpenter ants in a home; by the time you discover the first ant the inside of your wall could be destroyed.

In the age of the "Me Too" and "Times Up" movements, it is almost trite to say that if you become aware of matters of harassment or discrimination, you must tread carefully and consider appropriate workplace investigations, or consultation of a Human Resources professional or lawyer.

However, if you simply sense two employees are persistently annoyed by each other, either having different viewpoints or perhaps difficult personalities, there are some things you can do to avoid long term hassle. A simple way is just to use your NOGGIN. By NOGGIN, I don't just mean your head but this acronym I have created to guide you.

Normalize conflict. I often circulate surveys before teaching conflict management workshops in organizations. Among other things, I ask about views on conflict before coming into the training session. One registrant was quite clear that her goal for the course was to learn how to steer clear of conflict for the rest of her life and avoid it like an awful flu. I loved that answer because it highlighted for me that we all think that way in some respect, but must we? No! We need a paradigm shift. Conflict can be a great thing if fostered in a positive way because without conflict we would be devoid of team growth and ideas would remain static to avoid upsetting anyone. We would fail to meet every company's key objective these days …"to innovate". Therefore, your job as a manager can be to embrace conflict before it happens. Meet with your team and message them that you are well aware that friction always exists in the workplace but you would like to help celebrate the merits of it through team discussion, one-on-one discussion, or perhaps outsourcing coaching and training sessions. Through enhanced communications measures, most conflict can be overcome and you can strengthen the team.

Open ended questions can lead the way. Your Spidey senses may be tingling sensing some discord in the midst but you don't need to bludgeon the answers out of the suspected stakeholders involved. However, you can and you should check in with your team members regularly and ask open ended questions. You may be surprised what you learn. If you are sure something is going on but the employee seems nervous to share then rather than come out and say, "No, not good enough. My

senses are telling me something is bothering you, now what is it?!", be patient and find other opportunities to ask slightly adjusting the question. I once asked someone in two different ways about how life was treating them, and how is work et cetera with no answer. Sensing something was wrong I waited until a later date and came back to them with a slightly re-worded question to referencing a comment they made about dreading summer holidays before leaving for vacation and asked how the vacation went, which to my surprise elicited tears and a discussion about an impactful, upsetting personal event. The person expressed sincere thanks for my listening and sympathy once the message was out and I suddenly realized my narrative about the situation was completely wrong until receiving that new information. She was not bothered by other members in our group at all but just doing her level best to hold it together.

Get curious about the well-being of all of your staff. By talking to one person you may be tipped off about something happening with another within the department. At this point, you may be thinking I am advocating become a sleuth in your organization poking into everyone's business. That could not be further from my style or intended advice. However, I will advise not to be wilfully blind either, skating around stuff hoping everyone just figures it own on their own time and leaves you the heck out of it. Not so easy. Your team needs your leadership and therefore it is your duty to really listen and by that I mean REALLY listen and read between the lines whenever possible, even or maybe especially when you don't suspect any problems. When you are doing performance evaluations, or team check ins or just sharing a few chocolates kept on your desk to inspire visitors and conversations on a Friday afternoon, return to the open-ended question strategy, perhaps survey style like Reddit (my teen's favourite pastime). Ask questions like: 1) How are you liking your job these days? 2) How do you think the team is functioning? 3) Is everyone sort of in sync these days or could we come together to improve on some things? 4) How are you feeling about other team members? 5) If you had to make one change to our department to make you jump out of bed to come to work on Monday mornings what would it be?....and so on.

Generate trust where it may be lacking Ever challenged your children to a game of driveway basketball making the teams Kids vs. Parent? Something funny happens. I like to think it is a new common goal rather than a common enemy syndrome but it brings them together and inspires them to get along. How did your two angels (hours ago warring like 2 cats in a bag) suddenly become BFFs? Easy. They need to help each other in order to succeed. Caution, this concept can go very wrong at work. You may be thinking, "Super! I will just stick 2 frustrated employees on a team project. Done and done!".   Not so easy. That can shine a direct spotlight on the deepening crevasse between them and ratchet up the war. Rather, go to the fun (often corny) team-building projects for this experiment. Find fun ways for them to work together for a very limited time. Maybe doing something competitive is not the right thing but perhaps an icebreaker exercise at a team breakfast where you divide people into groups and ask them who they think the greatest personal influencer in their life is or how something in life negative or positive shaped who they are today (with an invitation to use discretion to share or not of course). Have a large group debrief and let the two introduce each other's narratives. Empathy building anyone? Using these techniques in workshops, I find I get less than effusive people suddenly warming up with a new glimmer of understanding about what another person may be going through.

Identify inference pitfalls and help your team members to avoid them. Senge et al. coined the useful term, "the ladder of inference", which refers to the idea that we often get 10 steps ahead assuming things about people when often completely unwarranted. Perhaps a colleague has told you that he

worked with the new guy at a previous job and that he is simply a first-class jerk. You go to your first meeting with the new guy/jerk and find yourself already assuming the first thing out of his mouth is obtuse. Maybe you had a few rounds with a colleague over issues of delay in work flow, not knowing that the seemingly deadline delinquent person was nursing a sick relative. You expect a work product from her this morning. It is 9:30 and you are already steamed just assuming it will be late "because that's her". As a manager you can discuss this with your team together and one-on-one. Ask your team to have this concept on their radar being willing to accept that sometimes people are capable of change whether naturally or through coaching. All hope is not lost if you get off to a bad start with someone.

Navigate the path forward by taking the lead reframe and generate voluntary solutions. Sometimes gently pushing change no longer works and you can take communication matters into your own hands. If someone is complaining about another, listen to his position and reframe. So, if the complaint is, "She is always late on every assignment", you might say "So if I understand correctly her late submission of assignments causes you stress and inconvenience?". That might be it or it might be something else but the reframing techniques will help you to uncover the sentiment. You might then head away from open-ended questions and opt for questions with defined or closed introductions. For example, "Knowing that Lara tends to be late on submitting assignments but has lots of other great things to offer our team, what are some ways you could suggest we can find a solution to this issue?". You are acknowledging the issue, empowering the player and working together to strengthen your team.

Often, a couple of people just simply cannot get along, despite your best efforts. While there may be no way to avoid every departure or litigation, some forward-thinking corporations are taking some positive steps to avoiding at least some. They hire a third-party neutral repository of trust, also known as a mediator with workplace restoration experience. This person can meet with the parties, hear their concerns and build a voluntary process to restore trust. This may sound very expensive but, often seemingly tough situations, can reset themselves on a positive track within a few hours over a few weeks time.

Conflict in the workplace is a challenge but much less stressful when managers are equipped with tools and training to make them both knowledgeable and nimble.