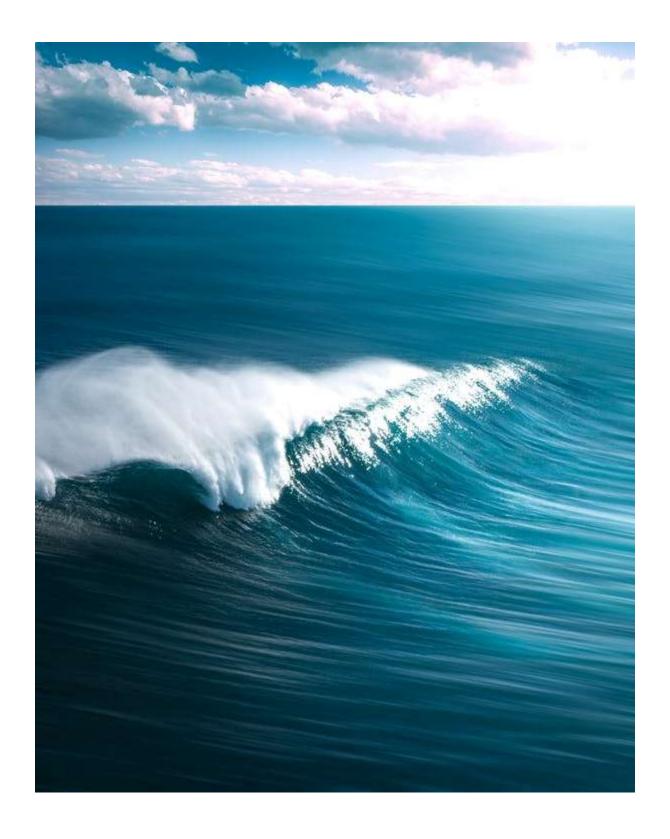# Flattening the Curve of Rising Tensions in the Workplace

Just about a week and a half ago, when the threat of a spreading pandemic loomed, I was inspired because a temporary harmony of sorts seemed to wash over humanity. It was the weekend and people bustled around to prepare to hunker down at home. A sort of muscle-memory, pre-holiday kindness could be felt as we collectively faced an existential threat.

Monday arrived, and together we tentatively moved into the first workweek like the end of a long weekend with family but also realized there was no certain end in sight. Some relished at the opportunity to get the long-awaited chance to work from home. By Wednesday, former social distancing doubters came on board and more employees migrated to their home offices and dining room tables. Most unfortunately, many faced layoffs and financial uncertainty. Many people who kept their jobs commented to me that, even though they felt fortunate to have jobs and were physically separated from co-workers, tensions began to rise. The general population is still working hard to be collectively supportive of each other but nerves are naturally frayed and are sometimes hard to mask in work interactions.

Uncertainty sparks the primordial human response of fight or flight. It is the #1 issue that I navigate with clients in my mediation practice, spanning every type of dispute but most often in the workplace. People want binary solutions to the challenges they face so that they can make autonomous decisions. As a result, you may have noticed tensions in your workplace/business relationships began to rise mid-week. The roller coaster movement of the market reflected our internal moods. Here are some tips to flatten the curve of workplace tensions:

1) **Use technology options like different paint brushes on a canvass to work through conflicts before they bubble up into disputes.** I spent a few years working as a mediator for an

organization with a high volume of complaints to manage. At the time, telephone mediation was the most efficient to manage thousands of conflicts each year and mitigate security risks. However, 80-90% of communication is non-verbal, which creates my love for video-conferencing and the global rush to such platforms. That said, cyber security experts warn of potential privacy issues with certain video-technology platforms so worth due diligence and careful consideration.

Process design is a key concept in the study of dispute resolution so take comfort in that we have so many options. Finesse them consciously and artfully like brushes on a canvass. If you sense tensions rising, try to work proactively with technology, rather than putting off the resolution until "this thing is over".

2) **Caucus more than usual.** If you do find yourself navigating tension among employees, immediately plunking 2 angry people on a video-conference or conference call to address tensions is somewhat limiting. Face-to-face meetings in person allow our subconscious animalistic instincts to take over and pick up subtle cues, including direct eye contact, choice of seating positions and listening to breathing patterns.

Without that, if you are navigating disputes among employees, spend much more time on an individual level drawing out parties with direct or facilitated open-ended questions, expressing sincere personal interest in well-being and pacing discussions and breaks with a conscious use of time. Basic needs are always key but now on people's minds more than ever. Are they sleeping, eating well, worried about loved ones or finances? Do they have wonderful and precious children at their heels ALL OF THE TIME? Meaningful resolutions can absolutely be achieved with technology and I have personally seen hundreds of success stories from my own practice but it just takes a conscious effort so keep plugging and stay hopeful.

3) **Be creative with team-building and trust-building measures.** Head off simmering tensions by getting ahead of the curve. Experts tell us that eroding trust is a key factor in the escalation of conflict. Lack of opportunity to interact diminishes trust building. CBMs (Confidence Building Measures) are key and essentially entail extending an olive branch. If you are on the bubble of conflict with someone you work with, take the time to reach out just to check in with them to see how they are doing. Arrange for the team to sing "Happy Birthday" to a co-worker through a video-conference or conference call.

4) **Find ways to create a sense of certainty.** There are a lot of challenges we don't know how to meet yet but there are things we can do so focus on those. If you can move meetings on-line, hone team technology skills. Make a plan that is achievable for you and your team so that people can check boxes and feel as if they are moving forward in an uncertain time. If you can, take the time to catch up on long-term assignments, touch base with clients, take the opportunity to do research that you keep pushing aside. This too shall pass and we will be off to the races again.

Finally, check in with yourself. Sleep, eat well and keep moving so that you keep your wits about you to help others navigate the stress of uncertainty.

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