

## When NOT to Avoid Conflict

Written by Steve Marr  
Tuesday, 03 June 2008 12:11

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Conflict in the workplace is something that most of us dislike, and therefore avoid. Often, we would rather avoid a conflict rather than deal with problematic issues, but if we fail to act, the problem will only get worse.

Consider Matt. He managed a sales department for a large insurance agency and he avoided conflict with staff at any cost. When he made the nicest of suggestions and was met with resistance, Matt would either change the subject or just say it was no big deal. He was afraid that any confrontation or conflict would escalate into a shouting match. So, whether customers' quotations were late, staff arrived tardy, or procedures were not followed, Matt would not address the issues.

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In reality, Matt, and all managers alike, are entrusted with supervisory responsibilities that need to be executed well. When managers fail to manage effectively, the nasty situation in Judges 21:25 is recreated, where, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (NASB).

Rather than avoiding problems, we all must learn to give regular, effective feedback. This provides several advantages:

#1 — Everybody knows where they stand. A common complaint with workers is that they are not receiving any feedback or that the feedback they do receive is muddled and confusing. As a result, workers do not know where they stand, which does nothing to build up morale.

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#2 — You can only fix things by addressing them. Sadly, the reverse is usually the case! We don't address a problem, yet we expect it to be fixed. Matt knew that getting quotations to customers late cost the business a lot of money. Some clients would solicit multiple bids for business and automatically rule out any late offers. Furthermore, because Matt never confronted late-arriving staff, the sales group became increasingly lax, with the late arrivals in the morning and after lunch impacting customer service.

King Solomon wrote, "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men are given fully to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11 NASB). When we fail to confront workplace issues, we lose the work effectiveness of the offender and, most importantly, the other staff. Paul observed, "But it takes only one wrong person among you to infect all the others—a little yeast spreads quickly through the whole batch of dough!" (Galatians 5:9 NLT).

Managers who fail to confront fall into two groups: the "dancers" and the "avoiders." The dancers communicate in generalities rather than in specifics, creating a situation where people just don't know what is being said. Matt would write in reviews, "We need to work a bit faster on getting out customer quotations" or "You need to be a little more careful in following company procedures." General and vague! Instead, he should have written, "One third of your customer quotations are delivered late. This causes us to lose customers. I am asking you to adjust your work priorities to ensure all quotations are delivered within our time standards." Specific and targeted!

The avoiders will stay away from conflict at any cost. Matt was also afraid that if he confronted staff, the situation would quickly turn into a shouting match. Matt wanted peace, at any price. Unfortunately, the business paid a large price for that peace. One day, Matt's boss explained

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that the department's sales were below par and that Matt had three months to increase sales volume by 25% or he would be fired. Faced with this dilemma, Matt overreacted. Every time a quote was late, he screamed; if someone walked in late, he would be sarcastic; and when a bid was lost, he would throw a tantrum.

Three months later, sales had not improved, and Matt was dismissed. The new manager later fired three additional people. In reality, while Matt endeavored to avoid conflict at any price, his habit of avoiding conflict is what cost him his job.

Furthermore, the three sales associates may have been able to improve satisfactorily with solid on-the-job coaching, but Matt was not willing or able to provide that training.

King Solomon observed, "A servant who is pampered from childhood will later become a rebel" (Proverbs 29:11 NLT). In reality, our ability to confront issues in a kind and effective way will not only enhance our business, but will benefit the careers of those whom we are entrusted to manage.

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