

Resolving Conflict On the Job

Written by Steve Marr
Monday, 03 June 2002 01:00

Tom was a sales manager for an electrical supply company. Because he wanted to set a good example for his sales force, he was quite aggressive in obtaining new business. Unfortunately, he often promised special services that the company couldn't deliver, and other times he would set prices below the company's cost just to get the business.

This didn't go unnoticed and, over time, the Operations Vice-President and the Comptroller became angry. While they both agreed something should be done, neither of them was willing to confront Tom about his business practices.

Finally, after nearly a year, the company President himself got involved. As he investigated the increasing number of customer complaints and the reduced profit margins, the picture became clear. Ultimately, the only "solution" was to dismiss Tom.

Too often, this is a realistic workplace scenario. Issues, which should be dealt with at the supervisory level, become middle management problems. And when middle management won't "face the music" and resolve the situation, the company's owner or CEO has to get involved. In the end failure to resolve such conflicts affects everyone, co-workers and supervisors as well as management.

Handling a situation like Tom's may never be easy. On-the-job confrontations seldom are. However, if a style of conflict resolution patterned after biblical principles had been followed, the company would not have encountered such severe difficulties, and the sales manager could have remained a productive team member.

Resolving Conflict On the Job

Written by Steve Marr
Monday, 03 June 2002 01:00

Conflict in any business is inevitable. Each of us has our own perspective on the events and people that make up our work area. These different perspectives don't always mesh well. The key to growth and progress, in spite of conflict, is to insure that whatever the conflict is, it is resolved in a positive way. What is critical to note is that the process is just as important as the end result? Even if the ultimate solution is not pleasant, the process of resolving the conflict can be a positive one.

There are three biblical principles you can adopt to work through conflict. When you do, your company will prosper, and your management and employees will avoid long-term conflict.

First, deal with any conflict quickly. Jesus was attacked many times by the Pharisees. Each time, His strategy was to confront the issue immediately. He never let anything slide for the sake of "keeping the peace." With wisdom and enviable precision, He faced each confrontation when it occurred.

Act quickly while the memory of an incident is fresh, because time has a way of rewriting the "facts." When we hold an offense or delay in confronting wrongdoing, our minds build on the foundation of frustration until the whole situation becomes distorted. If we fail to act quickly when we have been wronged, we give our anger an opportunity to grow. Delay also increases the chance of acting inappropriately when we finally do act. Most importantly, when we fail to act quickly we lose the opportunity for immediate improvement in the circumstances. The company's bottom line would have improved measurably had either the Vice-President or the Comptroller acted quickly to resolve the conflict.

Second, deal directly with the person who has offended you. Jesus instructed us in Scripture, "...if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private-" (Matthew 18:15 NASB). We must develop the biblical habit of going to the person who has erred or wronged us. Who else can immediately change the situation?

Resolving Conflict On the Job

Written by Steve Marr
Monday, 03 June 2002 01:00

Explain your issues clearly and calmly. Stick to the facts when you state the situation, and explain the consequences that have caused the problem. Recommend a solution. Keep positive by focusing the conversation on solutions, not by attacking the person or the problem you believe they have created. Avoid stating how you feel and how you are personally affected, or you and your colleague could easily digress into a personal conflict.

If you are unsuccessful in dealing with the person, continue to follow Scripture and, "...take one or two more with you,..." (Matthew 18:16 NASB). Talk to your immediate superior or the other person's supervisor, and request a meeting so the issues can be openly discussed. Remember, the only people who can effectively change the person's behavior are the person himself, their boss, or your boss, by exerting pressure. Discussing the issues with anyone else is gossip- you are adding gasoline to the fire, and will only make the situation worse. Do not fall into the temptation to gossip just to let off steam or to make yourself feel better.

How much faster and easier the resolution of Tom's conflict could have been if Tom had been confronted directly.

Third, deal completely with an issue. Don't leave loose ends or wiggle room. Make sure the issue is understood by each person involved.

Ask them to "play back" their understanding of the issues. When a solution is determined, ask each person to clarify their understanding. Have everyone verbalize agreement with the next steps to be taken, then set the time-frame for their response. If future actions are to be different to avoid problems, clearly confirm the future change. It is a good idea to document the conversation in a memo to avoid future misunderstandings. Often a great meeting is ruined by failure to follow through.

When you are determined to deal completely with your challenge, so it will not resurface, a deeper issue may emerge. Only when the real issue is addressed can conflict be fully resolved, so be alert to the possibility of a deeper issue.

Resolving Conflict On the Job

Written by Steve Marr
Monday, 03 June 2002 01:00

Tom's desire to set a good example was admirable, but his methodology wasn't. Setting limits early on, through appropriate confrontation, might have averted the year-long problem Tom caused. Sadly, someone like Tom can drive your business into the ground, if left to themselves.

The workplace may never be the perfect place, but your efforts to resolve on-the-job conflict can make it a better place for everyone. The next time difficult issues arise, remember: deal with the issue quickly- speak only with the people directly involved- and make sure the situation is resolved completely. Then sit back and watch your business prosper.

Steve Marr, Your Christian Business Coach

Subscribe to the free Business Proverbs e-mail here: <http://bit.ly/ncixc1>

"Resolving Conflict On-the-Job" was a featured article in "Godly Business Woman" magazine-July/August 2000 issue. godlybusinesswoman.com