

Reducing Conflict Between Peers is an Art **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPLP**

Conflict within your organization can squander the energy and creativity of your team. Nobody enjoys conflict, but often the actions of professionals kindles internal battles that could easily be avoided. If you could measure where the energy in your organization is being consumed, you would likely find most of it evaporating in internal squabbles rather than being applied toward customer satisfaction or beating the competition.

Conflict among peers is particularly hurtful because people who function in parallel roles must cooperate for the organization to achieve its goals. If peer conflict could be reduced, say by 75%, more time and energy could be focused on the opportunities and threats to the business instead of being dissipated in unnecessary turf battles.

Why does peer conflict occur, and how can it be greatly reduced?

Peers see themselves in a conflict situation from the start, especially if they report to different units. Loyalty to one's own parochial point of view often means a built-in conflict among individuals. In the scramble for scarce resources such as funding, key personnel, production time, and training, peers struggle to gain the lion's share for themselves. This "I win – you lose" mentality is the fuel for the fire of inter-peer conflict. You can improve the track record within your organization by practicing some simple concepts.

The ideas listed below are not a set of underhanded tricks or manipulation of others. Rather, these concepts help define the high road to interpersonal prowess. Following them shows your level of integrity, maturity, and moral fiber. Do these things because they are right, not to come out on top,. They represent the causeway to peer cooperation.

- Treat your peers and superiors with the same respect and integrity as people in your own group. Often that is a challenge because you compete with them for critical resources. The best advice is to always use the *golden rule*.
- Find ways to help peers in ways they recognize. Visualize yourself walking around the office with a bundle of olive branches strapped to your back. Each day see how many olive branches you can give away to people who would normally squabble with you.

- Whenever possible, be a vocal supporter of your peers' position in meetings. If you act like an ally, it is more difficult for peers to view you as an adversary. If you think of them as the enemy, they will reciprocate.
- Go the extra mile to help peers solve problems. Sometimes that means taking problem people off their hands to make a fresh start in your organization. It might mean the loan of equipment or other tangible assets. Be bountiful with your assistance. Favors lead to good will and often result in returned favors.
- Foster great relationships with the key lieutenants of your peers. They have high influence and will help your cause if they see you as a friend.
- Bond with peers whenever possible in social settings. Get to know their families and their hobbies, etc. The closer you are as friends, the more they will help you at work. The basis of politics is that "friends do things for other friends."
- Often, you will negotiate with peers for resources. Establish a track record of being fair and looking for the win-win opportunities. Never try to win at the other person's expense. It will usually boomerang, and you will lose in the end.
- Be visible with your concessions. Demonstrate that you deal with fairness.
- Resist the temptation to "blow in" a peer when he or she makes a mistake. It may feel good at the time, but you have made an enemy. You can never afford an enemy if it can be avoided (and it usually can.) Some people go around creating enemies to satisfy their ego, their lust for conquest, or just to have fun. They don't last very long, and they create a lot of damage for others to clean up. If a peer makes a mistake, it is a great opportunity to help him or her regain equilibrium, not a time to twist the knife. Kindness pays off.
- Do not engage in e-mail battles. If a peer is less than kind in an e-mail, respond to it with courtesy and maturity. Getting into a public food fight over some issue has no place in the adult world, yet we see it all the time. Be bigger than that.
- Don't belittle, berate, or embarrass people, even if they do things to deserve it. This is a test of your maturity.
- When you make a mistake or create a political faux pas, admit it immediately and ask for forgiveness. Don't try to hide your blunders. People who admit mistakes earn the respect of their peers. Those who try to cover up gaffs often appear duplicitous and lower their credibility.
- Offer help when your peer is in a crisis. We all need help from time to time, and we remember those who were gracious with their assistance.

There are hundreds of other ways to foster cooperation among your peers and superiors. They are just common sense and reiterate the advice of the famous football coach, Lou

Holtz: “Do what is Right.” Sparring and counter punches are better focused on the competition than on your valued teammates.

When peers can rise above the temptation to be parochial, it allows the greater good to happen. Reducing conflict and tension not only makes people enjoy their work more, it also allows them to focus more energy on activities critical to organizational health.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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