

Conflict puts a dent in productivity, results

■ *First of a two-part series on conflict in the workplace.*

By TRENTON HIGHTOWER

In their book "Illness: An Intelligent Act of the Body," Drs. Allen and Lisa Lawrence reflect a recent finding of medical research: as much as 80 percent of all illnesses are stress-related. That's a lot of doctors' waiting room chairs and hospital beds filled with people complaining of headaches, chronic pain, cardiovascular disease, insomnia and digestive distress.

Where's all this stress coming from?

Here's one scenario. If the estimates are right, many of us spend close to 50 percent of our waking hours at work. It just seems to follow, doesn't it, that quite a bit of the stress that is making us ill and dissatisfied happens at work?

Assuming that's reasonable, let's look a little closer at why work can be so potentially hazardous to our health. In all fairness, not even the most irascible employee arrives at work looking for a fight. No one logs onto their computer in the morning thinking "Today, I'm going to seek out as much conflict as I

can. I'm going to argue with as many people as I can find. By the end of today, I want to have done my part to be sure the entire office is off-task, distracted and drained."

On the contrary. I think most of us head for our desks looking to be a part of a much different scenario. We seek balance, equilibrium and cohesiveness in the workplace. Yet despite our best intentions, conflict — and the lack of productivity and results — is too often the order of the day.

The source of the most destructive sort of conflict in the workplace may surprise you.

In my experience, conflict at work happens on two levels. No doubt some of it is based on business differences — lack of consensus about mission, vision, values and objectives. With varying opinions about priorities, budgets, timelines and staffing issues, differing business agendas can definitely waste your team's time and erode its sense of esprit de corps.

Oddly enough, however, there's an even more damaging type of conflict

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Curriculum vitae

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lurking in the cubicles and corridors of your company. Far more counterproductive than business differences at work is the conflict caused by personal differences — disparate feelings and attitudes.

In other words, "personality" conflicts.

Why do personalities create such a furor at work? After all, we're all professionals, right? I think part of the hubbub can be traced to the fact that even when people refrain from verbal sparring, their actions speak more loudly than their words would have.

In his landmark book, "Silent Messages," Dr. Albert Moravian talks about the nature of communication. According to Dr. Moravian, only 7 percent of communication involves the words we choose. Only 7 percent!

The tone of our voice, he says, accounts for a full 38 percent, and the rest — a whopping 55 percent — of communication is completely non-verbal body language and facial expressions. With so much nonverbal communications being exchanged from 9 to 5 — most of it unconscious — it's no wonder the workplace can sometimes be overrun with conflict.

So what's a manager to do?

We'll take a closer look at resolving conflict in Nov. 1's column, but until then, let me offer a little advice from Tom Kayser's book, "Mining Group Gold." The technique is known as "Feelings, Facts & Solutions."

When conflict arises, Mr. Kayser says, you simply must deal with feelings first. Use whatever techniques have worked for you in the past, but get the feelings out on the table. Only when you've gotten through the feelings can a group begin to identify the facts at hand without distractions. When the facts are clearly defined, he continues, you can begin to strategize solutions.

Need a primer on sources of conflict at work? Tune in to The Apprentice. Verbal barbs are exchanged, but the drama of the "reality show" is driven primarily by the silent messages identified by Dr. Moravian in his book — the eye rolls, the gestures, the crossed arms, the head-shaking. Granted, some of the communication is assisted with strategic editing after the fact, but the basic lesson is there.

Next week we'll look at the 4 A's of conflict resolution: acknowledgement, acceptance, appreciation and adaptation.

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