

There is a cost to the conflict within an organization

Not all organizations experience the negative consequences of workplace conflict, but many do. If you have to use formal mediation or redress systems, or if you have employee lawsuits or grievances, then it's probably time to get serious about changing your culture.

You may even be experiencing an openly hostile work environment, though many times the signs of unresolved workplace conflict are less obvious. For example, if you can answer yes to any of these questions, it probably indicates unresolved conflicts are causing business problems at work.

■ Do individuals spend time at work complaining about others, pointing the finger and blaming others for problems?

■ Are some people reluctant to work with others and, in fact, re-structuring has had to occur to separate them? Are you aware of communication problems, withholding of information or sabotage occurring?

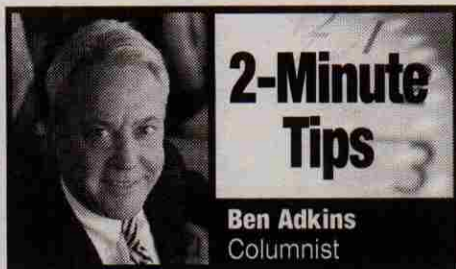
■ Do you lose good people because they just can't get along with others?

■ Have you observed backstabbing behaviors or cliques being formed?

■ Has anyone ruined your day by "showing up?"

There is an uncommon response to interpersonal conflict that I wish would become common. It is to have a face-to-face conversation with the person with whom we are having conflict. This is not the approach to conflict that most often occurs, but wouldn't it be nice if it came naturally. With this enlightened approach we could, most of the time, work out our differences in a positive way.

Instead, a more common response to



conflict is "flight" or "fight." Examples of fight responses include threatening behavior, shouting, hostile gestures, forming cliques, taking sides, gossip and undermining. Examples of the flight response include avoiding, withdrawing, withholding information, not returning messages and the silent treatment. These flight and fight behaviors lead to increased costs because of wasted time dealing with the conflict, excessive turnover caused by conflict, low morale and productivity, poor teamwork and decision making, ineffective leadership and formal mediation, redress or grievance processes.

What would your workplace be like if these flight and fight responses were eliminated? Better teamwork, higher productivity, more trust and job fulfillment would be the likely outcome. More fun, too. There is a growing number of us who believe destructive workplace conflict (and by the way, there is such a thing as healthy conflict) can be eliminated.

People can manage their differences in a constructive way and create positive outcomes for themselves and their organizations.

How?

1.) By learning the basic skills of conflict resolution.

2.) By creating a safe environment for individuals who have conflict with their peers or supervisor to address and resolve their issues.

3.) By developing a culture that supports and encourages positive conflict resolution.

In the 20th Century, organizations learned there are ways to strategically manage safety. Safety equipment and safety training lead to tremendous amounts of money being saved by organizations. The return on the investment in safety programs far outweighed the expense. Today, savvy organizations are learning that workplace conflict can be strategically managed as

well. The benefits of eliminating destructive workplace conflict far outweigh the expense of training employees on how to resolve conflicts with others. In fact, it is a smart business decision to create a conflict-free workplace.

Tip: It doesn't take much time, nor cost much to have everyone learn the basic skills of conflict resolution. The real cost is if employees and leaders do not have these skills.

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