

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Conflict

By Douglas E. Welch

In work, as in life, there is a certain amount of conflict that naturally occurs. Even when the results of conflict are good, engaging in it can be stressful and tiring. That said, trying to ignore or avoid conflict in your work can actually make it worse when it does occur. Often, the best way to address conflict is straight on, before it has a chance to develop into something more difficult or troubling.

Forcing the Issue

I can freely admit that I am one of the most conflict-averse people you will ever meet. I don't like confronting people and find conflict draining, both mentally and physically. Over the years I have gone to sometimes ridiculous lengths to avoid conflict. As I have grown older, though, I have developed a better sense about what battles are worth fighting and when to fight them.

My own rule for conflict, especially in my high-tech career, is to address issues as soon as they arise. If a client has a question or complaint about billing, address it now. Don't wait until the end of the month when you submit your statement, or even the end of the day. Sit down with the client before any more work is done and come to an agreement. Otherwise, you will find yourself fighting to get paid for work that you have already accomplished.

Do you have an employee or co-worker who isn't doing what needs to be done? Set up a meeting as soon as possible. This ensures that the issue is fresh in everyone's mind. You can then point to recent actions as exact examples of the problem you are addressing. Contrast this with the typical end-of-year performance review, where every transgression is revisited. How are you, or your employees, supposed to discuss issues that you may barely remember?

Ignore at Your Peril

Even if you dislike conflict immensely, you will find that ignoring problems only makes them worse. From the smallest slight to the biggest ethical conflict, time only makes the issue seem larger and causes people to act even more irrationally. The longer a conflict festers, the worse the damage that may occur, and the more stressful the

confrontation. Instead of nipping a problem in the bud, the conflict is allowed to continue, involving more people, generating more ill will and guaranteeing a major blow-up when it is finally addressed.

Conflict Resolution

Here are some important guidelines to help you.

Quickly decide how important an issue is to you. If the problem is small, you might just decide to ignore it. That said, you need to carefully look at the issue to ensure that it won't come back to haunt you in a much more dramatic fashion at a later time. Choose your battles wisely, fighting only those that really matter to you.

Address the issue immediately. Don't wait for your anger to grow to prevent you from addressing the issue. As unemotionally as possible, address the issue with those involved. Even if they become emotional, try to restrain yourself. Fighting fire with fire only heightens the tension and actually lessens the possibility of easily resolving the issue. Don't wait for weeks to broach the topic, or other people may simply deny that there ever was a problem. Addressing it immediately ensures that it is fresh in everyone's mind.

Don't back down. If the issue is truly important to you, don't allow your dislike of conflict to dissuade you from searching for a resolution. This only allows others to take advantage of you, exploiting your conflict-avoidance to further their own aims.

Once you have addressed an issue, let it go. Don't let the stress and nervousness of engaging in conflict color the rest of your day or week. In fact, dealing with an issue brings a certain sense of relief and closure. Dealing with conflict can actually make you feel better than trying to ignore or stewing over an issue.

Conflict is a necessary part of everyone's life. Don't allow your worries, fears and disappointments to go unresolved. You need to address conflict in order to move on to other, probably more important, issues. While it may not seem so when dealing with an issue, addressing conflict is a benefit to you, your life and your career. □

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