

Why the Conflict? What's the Problem?

Finding out what's really going on can save a lot of time and trouble

- By Dan Goldberg

As sales professionals and managers we never know what our customer and/or team members are thinking. Quite often something that seems trivial to us can cause a conflict in our sales cycle or our team's interactions.

Problems arise and somehow we usually seem to figure out ways to deal with them. However when conflicts happen they can quickly turn into uncontrollable cancers that eat away at our productivity and teams.

But what is conflict? Conflict is a clash or disagreement between two or more individuals or groups. Whereas a problem quite often has a succinct solution, a conflict is surrounded by more complex issues.

For instance, employees dealing with the loss of parking facilities, having difficulty in computer skills, and experiencing terrible interactions with co-workers have several problems. Only one of these problems is really a conflict, the conflict with the co-workers. Conflicts are caused by underlying



problems. Why have the employees had these terrible interactions? What does each group need? What does each group want? What are the real underlying causes of the problem?

A conflict can be seen as a type of problem based on a problem. In essence, conflict is surrounded by a problem or problems.

Understanding the Root Problem is the Key

The word problem is the key. In order to seek a resolution, one has to ask, "What is the problem?" Although the conflict with co-workers is a kind of problem, it is also based on a problem. Perhaps other employees offered some inaccurate information about their co-workers. Perhaps the conflict has a history, and the real problem is the rivalry between the co-workers in a different setting a year ago. Was there incomplete or inaccurate communication between them? Had one of them heard an inaccurate rumor? Was at least one of them experiencing stress overload? Did they argue

because they really had different viewpoints or values? Did limited resources make it difficult for them to share something they wanted? Or even more basically, what were the unmet psychological needs underlying their conflict?

The Basis for Conflict is Found in Unmet Needs

Inevitably, conflict is based on one or a combination of unmet psychological needs. These basic needs are:

- **Identity.** Identity is who we are, our individuality or group affiliation. We may be Canadian, male, and a member of the specific group in work. Conflicts may arise when the loss of our identity is threatened, (i.e. that is who I am and/or how I wish to be labeled)."
- **Security.** The need for security or safety may also be a reason for conflicts, (i.e. "I don't want my position as supervisor threatened")
- **Control.** Control or power is also an important factor. People may think, "My job as a manager makes me important or powerful." The need for power or control is often more difficult to handle than the need for recognition or security.
- **Recognition.** The need for recognition commonly underlies conflict. A marketing executive fighting over an office with a controller might complain, "The finance people always get the corner offices." Scientists arguing about who's name will appear first on the front page of a research report are often expressing a need for recognition.
- **Fairness.** It is not uncommon to find that sometimes people will want their property returned because of their need for fairness rather than a desire for the property itself. ("I really didn't want the stapler back anyway; it just wasn't fair for him to take it in the first place!") When individuals have strong, opposing viewpoints about what they consider to be fair, the resulting situations are often hard to resolve because it is extremely difficult to negotiate values.



All these needs are prevailing and lie beneath conflicts everywhere. To understand a conflict, it is important to focus on what's driving it from beneath.

What Is the Problem?

When conflicts arise, you must continue to ask, "What is the problem?" Making assumptions can prevent good conflict resolution by completely

bypassing the real issues. For example, the team member wishing to drop out might say, "My problem is that I need to get out of that team," when the underlying reason might be fear of failure (need for recognition and control) or a dislike of some of the other people in the team (need for security). The statement, "I need to get out of my team" is really a solution, not a definition of a problem. Similarly, the team member who asks the leader to remove another member is offering a solution and not presenting a problem. The leader might be wise to look for and listen to the underlying reasons before stepping in to solve the problem.

Too often conflicts can create an underlying stress that is so strong that while management may be blind to it the staff is a volcano just waiting to erupt. It is not uncommon for me to work with management teams and staff members who are blind to each others' real needs. The staff gets ticked off because management dictates what "has" to be done without stepping back to see what the existing load already is on their beleaguered staff. And management gets annoyed because the staff doesn't seem to react quickly enough to fulfill their "needs."

The stress is unbelievable. Everyone seems to want to work together but yet they are so conflicted by the situation that many of them speak freely amongst their own groups about leaving their jobs.



Attempts at Resolution

So how do these groups and so many others in similar situations deal with these enormous conflicts? Usually, quite poorly.

The initial reaction by management is to "avoid" the fact that it really exists. They'll say something like, "Why can't you get this project completed, I could do it in a half an hour!" Sure they could if they didn't have twenty other things to do! And they may also fail to realize that while they could do a like project in half an hour, the nuances of this particular one may, in reality, take two and a half hours.

It always creates a conflict when anyone thinks that they're comparing apples to apples, which may be true, except they fail to understand that they are in actuality comparing a Granny Smith apple to a Red Delicious one.

The staff also avoids the situation by not addressing it with the manager. Sure they'll moan and groan about it, but they'll never address it directly. So the conflict goes on and on. But why?

Managers want control and staff fears the potential lack of security if they bring up the problems. In addition, it is not infrequent that the staff feels that management consistently fails to recognize a job well done but yet is quick to jump on employees who don't complete projects within their time or process parameters. Managers fear staff rolling down hill on them as well. Oh the unfairness of it all! And, to boot, everyone's managerial or staff identity is threatened.

The conflict continues to fester. The stress is almost thick enough to cut with the proverbial knife and the overload gets worse.

Someone figures out that there's a problem and looks for a compromise. Mistake! Compromise only brings losses to both sides. This may sound a bit alien since we have been taught throughout our lives that compromise brings resolution. Well it may, but it sure doesn't bring about a feeling of winning. Compromise means that each party may have had to have given up something, and it might have been something that they really wanted to hold onto. This may lead to a situation that resolved itself in the short term but it leaves a major problem in the long run, especially if the project isn't satisfactory in the end.

Next someone decides that the best way to get things moving and completed is to set up a competitive environment. "Teams" are set up and the competition starts. Rewards are set in place and the games begin.

Initially people get into it and forget about the overload. Ultimately one group wins. However one group also loses. They begin to complain how unfair the competition was. The Granny Smith to Red Delicious examples come out and the conflict takes on a new identity. The conflict has reached new levels. Not only are there conflicts between staff and management but between the staff "teams" as well. This situation can also evolve into a confrontation.

Then a savior steps forward and tries to nurture the situation with accommodation only to find that they've just created another form of compromise. Softer and sweeter but compromise none the less. What's left?

When Running Into Conflicts:

Don't:

- Avoid the issues
- Try to compromise
- Set up competition
- Try to smooth over things by accommodation

Do:

- Collaborate
- Listen
- Ask questions
- Be open to feedback
- Be non-judgmental

Sometimes nothing. The organization has crashed and burned. Imploded under its own weight.

Someone, either a staff member or management person, should have taken the time and energy to stop and ask questions, asked for non-judgmental feedback, listened to the responses, and respected the opinion of others.

A Collaborative Effort

Fear, whether fear of losing one's position, power, prestige or whatever, leads more companies into disaster. The only way to resolve conflict is through collaboration. Collaboration means listening, learning, taking opinions, facts and other factors into consideration. It means asking, reviewing and asking again. It also leads to decisions based understanding, knowledge, wisdom and interaction. It enables the parties involved to acknowledge and participate into how and why the conclusions were made and what the results will be in its application.



By resolving conflicts in this manner all parties communicate with each other. This fosters trust, caring and a feeling of family within an organization. It sets in motion creativity and growth. In addition it certainly relieves stress and bitterness. And most importantly, once this process becomes part of an organization's culture, it lessens the probability that conflicts will continue to arise at all.

Running smooth and conflict free, or as free as possible, organizations, revolves around communication. Allowing for non-judgmental feedback without retribution is very important. That's how we learn. Listening, and speaking with, not at, others is the track that keeps us moving toward growth, harmony and more profitable businesses.

In our current business climate it's suicidal for any manager, team leader or owner to create an atmosphere of conflict.

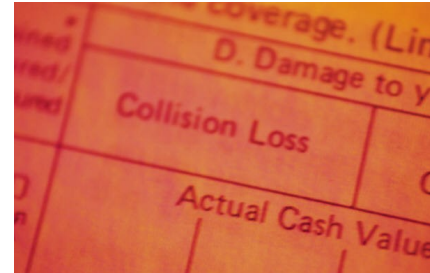
Look for the signs before they come looking for you. It may be too late by then. The job market is too tight and your health is too important to let conflict ruin your business.

Remember, resolution through collaboration is far better than ruination through confrontation.

Case In Point

Recently I helped a client resolve a conflict situation between its supervisors and staff. The company is in the insurance industry and its case managers (staff) were being consistently over worked. The supervisors thought nothing of bringing new cases to staff members without regard to their existing workload. In addition, these new cases always seemed to be top priority items. However, the staff already knew that the vast majority of the existing cases were also urgent situations.

As one staff member said, "We're given one hundred and forty cases a day and we can only process one hundred. On top of that the supervisors dump new stuff on us all the time and expect us to drop everything! The only way out of this seems to be to get out of here"! With that the other staff members in the room shook their heads in agreement.



My question was, "Have you told this to your supervisors"?

The response was typical. "When we try, they chew our heads off and make us feel like incompetent jerks."

The resolution was to get the groups of staff and management to sit down together.

During facilitation I would ask each group how they felt about the pressures each of them had. Why they failed to communicate. How they saw themselves and their responsibilities. What would happen if either of them decided to leave and a number of other questions that opened up their feelings and views of themselves and each other?

After a while avoidance was gone, competition began to fade and compromise and accommodation were seen to leave unanswered questions on the table.

Once each group began to understand the reasons for their pressures and behaviors a plan was devised that enabled everyone to forge clear parameters, new priorities, open communication channels and regular meetings, which included both groups, to constantly address evolving issues.

We also included some time management training. There was a realization that both groups wasted time with functions that were low priority and could be either sent to departments that could handle them without problem or dropped altogether.

Workloads were shifted with supervisors realizing that some functions were actually better and more efficiently done by them. Staff worked with supervisors to eliminate some duplication of effort. Each side listened non-judgmentally to the other. And over a short period of time other issues were dealt with accordingly.

The company is running quite a bit smoother now. Folks feel that they're listened to and taken seriously, moral is much higher and the work is getting done!

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