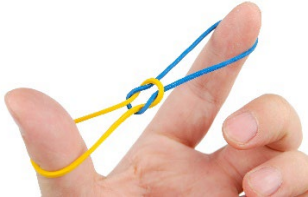


Reducing Conflict 33 Workload

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



One of the biggest sources of conflict has to do with workload. Most people recognize how hard they are working and imagine (they would say observe) that other people are not putting forth the same effort. This perceived inequity is the most common cause of conflict at work.

Habitual Problem?

Do you have far too much work to do than any human being can achieve on a daily basis? Is this an habitual problem at your place of work? If so, then join the club of millions of workers who feel that way.

I view the workload issue like a rubber band. In good times, the rubber band is slack, and people have a comfortable workload that has peaks of stretch and some slack times. As the economy gets tighter, or as staffing levels become more problematical, the rubber band of resources gets stretched tighter and tighter until it nearly snaps. In some cases, it actually does snap, and people break down from the load and stress. We've seen that a lot recently.

The other phenomenon is that when you stretch anything beyond its elastic limit, then its ability to snap back to a normal relaxed state is lost. If you take a rubber band and hold it fully stretched long enough, then it will not go back to a fully relaxed state. We also see this happening as we hold people at the snapping point so long that they simply have forgotten how it feels to have a reasonable workload. There is no ability to increase capacity, yet in a time where there is a little slack, they cannot relax to enjoy it.

Other Side of the Coin

There is a flip side to this argument. I have witnessed people who are constantly complaining about the crushing load and that they simply cannot accomplish everything on their plate, but if you watch them, they really do have many opportunities to conserve time and change their situation for the better. I know many people who spend an average of 2-3 hours a day on the phone and in face-to-face bitch sessions with others. The primary topic is usually how there is simply not enough time to get their work done. Hmm.

There needs to be some form of balance. A person cannot continually work at maximum capacity without running out of gas.

When talking with managers, they will tell me that they do not have enough resources to make ends meet. The habitual statement is "I simply need more people to do the work," yet when I get these same managers together to talk about how they can make improvements, they readily tell me they are frustrated because too many people are goofing off and not applying themselves as they should. Hmmm again.

Low Productivity

I believe the average company in the USA obtains less than 50% of the potential from their workforce on a regular basis. That figure is generous, based on many studies. There seems to be a disconnect between how people perceive their load and the actual state of being overloaded. That is not true in every single case, of course. There are situations where the overload is genuine. This is particularly true in the era of the pandemic when staffing levels in many industries are way too thin.

Higher Engagement

One way to mitigate this problem is a thing called engagement, and the road to achieve engagement is paved with trust. Without trust, workers will not reach anywhere near their potential because they will not really be engaged in the work. Numerous studies show that the productivity of high trust groups is several times higher than the productivity of low trust groups. If you want to have people be able to tolerate the stretch of the rubber band that is so common these days, then work on developing a culture of higher trust.

Trust in many organizations is low now due to the way people have been treated during the pandemic. Smart leaders know the way back to a sustainable way of operating means reestablishing and maintaining trust with workers. Employees at all levels need to feel like their company has their best interest as part of the equation.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.