

Reducing Conflict 76 Peer Conflict

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Peer conflict within your organization can squander the energy and creativity of your team. Nobody enjoys conflict, but often the actions of some people kindle internal battles they could avoid.

Where is energy being consumed?

Measure where the energy in your organization is consumed. Most of it may be evaporating with internal squabbles. It should be applied toward customer satisfaction or beating the competition.

Peer relationships are especially prone to conflict

Conflict among peers is particularly hurtful. People who function in parallel roles must cooperate for the organization to achieve its goals. Lower peer conflict means more resources directed at the organization's goals.

Why does peer conflict occur, and how can we reduce it? Peers see themselves in a conflict situation from the start, especially if they report to different units.

Too much "I win, you lose" mentality

Loyalty to one's own parochial point of view often means a built-in conflict among individuals. In the scramble for scarce resources, peers struggle to gain the lion's share for themselves. This "I win, you lose" mentality is the fuel for the fire of peer conflict. You can improve the track record within your organization by practicing some simple concepts.

The ideas listed below are not a set of underhanded tricks or manipulation of others. Rather, these concepts help define the high road to interpersonal prowess. Following them shows your level of integrity, maturity, and moral fiber. Do these things because they are right, not to come out on top. They represent the causeway to peer cooperation.

A dozen ways to improve peer cooperation

1. Treat your peers and superiors with respect and integrity. Often that is a challenge because you compete with them for critical resources. The best advice is to always use the golden rule.

2. Find ways to help peers in ways they recognize. Visualize yourself walking around the office with a bundle of olive branches strapped to your back. Each day, see how many olive branches you can give away to people who would normally squabble with you.
3. Whenever possible, be a vocal supporter of your peer's position in meetings. If you act like an ally, it is more difficult for peers to view you as an adversary. If you think of them as the enemy, they will reciprocate.
4. Go the extra mile to help peers solve problems. Sometimes that means taking problem people off their hands to make a fresh start in your organization. It might mean the loan of equipment or other tangible assets. Be bountiful with your assistance. Favors lead to goodwill and often result in returned favors.
5. Bond with peers whenever possible in social settings. This is more difficult in hybrid situations. Get to know their families and their hobbies. The closer you are as friends, the more they will help you at work. The basis of politics is that "friends do things for other friends."
6. Often, you will negotiate with peers for resources. Establish a track record of being fair and looking for win-win opportunities. Never try to win at the other person's expense. It will usually boomerang, and you will lose in the end.
7. Be visible with your concessions. Demonstrate that you deal with fairness.
8. Resist the temptation to "blow in" a peer after a mistake. It may feel good at the time, but you have made an enemy. You can never afford an enemy if it can be avoided, and it usually can. Some people go around creating enemies to satisfy their ego, their lust for conquest, or just to have fun. They don't last very long, and they create a lot of damage for others to clean up. If a peer makes a mistake, it is a great opportunity to help him or her regain equilibrium, not a time to twist the knife. Kindness pays off.
9. Do not engage in email battles. If a peer is less than kind in an email, respond to it with courtesy and maturity. Getting into a public food fight over some issue has no place in the adult world, yet we see it all the time. Be bigger than that.
10. Don't belittle, berate, or embarrass people, even if they do things to deserve it. This is a test of your maturity.
11. When you create a political faux pas, admit it immediately and ask for forgiveness. Don't try to hide your blunders. People who admit mistakes earn the respect of their peers. Those who try to cover up gaffs often appear duplicitous and lower their credibility.
12. Offer help when your peer is in a crisis. We all need help from time to time, and we remember those who were gracious with their assistance.

There are hundreds of other ways to foster cooperation among your peers and superiors. They are just common sense. They reiterate the advice of the famous football coach Lou Holtz: "Do what is right." Doing the right thing is about being authentic rather

than manipulative. Sparring and counterpunches should be focused on the competition rather than on your valued teammates.

Conclusion

When peers can rise above the temptation to be parochial, it allows the greater good to happen. Reducing conflict and tension makes people enjoy their work more. It also allows them to focus more energy on activities critical to organizational health.

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