



PERSONAL INTEGRITY ON A PROFESSIONAL BATTLEGROUND

LOCKING HORNS WITH A COWORKER IS FRUSTRATING, BUT IT CAN ALSO SHED LIGHT ON YOUR BELIEF SYSTEMS — IF YOU ARE WILLING TO STEP OUT OF YOUR ENTRENCHED POSITION.

By CAT THOMPSON

“WHY DOES SHE ALWAYS TRY AND MAKE ME LOOK LIKE AN IDIOT?” Liz wondered, her face flushing red. It was the third time this month that her colleague, Jane, had opposed her opinion or corrected a small detail in front of the rest of the team. “Obviously, she is out to get me,” she thought, making a mental note not to loop Jane in on a client conference call scheduled for later that afternoon.

Although Jane and Liz were peers — team leaders from two departments who had to collaborate closely to complete a big project — it seemed increasingly obvious that they had a personality conflict, and the subtle torpedoes they were sending one another were in danger of derailing not just the team, but the whole account. Jane had taken to highlighting the tiniest flaws in every document Liz created. Liz had taken to crossing her arms and looking grim every time Jane made a point, and then bad-mouthing “Ms. Perfect” to anyone who would listen.

At some point in our careers, most of us find ourselves in situations not unlike this one. In some cases, it gets bad enough that we resign projects, change jobs, or even try to get our opponents fired. Ironically, it’s rarely a professional problem that’s at the root of the matter. More often, it’s a personal one. And valuable personal lessons are there for the taking, but only if we are willing to step back from our judgments and look honestly at the emotional underpinnings of the conflict.

NO BLAME, NEW BELIEF

Emotional energy is magnetic. It draws experiences designed to tell us something about what we believe. Especially in

interpersonal relationships, conflict can be a wonderful mirror, helping us see what we believe and ultimately to question if that particular belief is one we choose to maintain.

It’s like that phrase, “objects in mirror may be closer than they appear.” In some cases the object that we see in the form of another person is actually a reflection of our own fear. Or it may be a limited belief or outgrown value system that resides within us, and that we are getting ready to root out. The conflict or offense is designed to make us aware of the discrepancy and to generate enough emotional energy to launch us into a new perspective or position. But that takes a lot of personal integrity and insight, and it also takes getting past knee-jerk reactions like blame and resentment.

Developing a co-creative perspective is the first step. When we can see conflict as a co-created experience, we accept that each person has half of the responsibility for the conflict, and that each possesses the potential to gain some insight or understanding from it.

For example, if you believe that you haven’t been doing a very good job at work lately and are afraid someone else might see that and point it out, there is a good chance that your fear of that event will actually create it. That is because our emotional energy is designed to help us create experiences that cause us to develop and grow. Unfaced, unconquered fears limit us, and that is why our worst fears often land right in our lap.

In this case, a co-worker might make an offhand, unkind comment about your lack of commitment to your job. The comment stings. You feel compelled to defend yourself.

Meanwhile, this other person has his or her own internal dramas going, and may very well be co-creating a similar kind of exploratory experience with you.

In our Jane and Liz scenario, for example, Jane may very well be a “nice” but deeply insecure person who believes she is helping Liz by pointing out her mistakes. She wants everyone to respect her and works overtime to double check every detail (including Liz’s work), but she is unconsciously creating a situation where she has to face being disliked, resented and even made fun of.

CRASH COURSE IN CONFLICT

So what happens to you when you find yourself stuck in this kind of conflict at the office? Usually, an enormous amount of energy goes into nursing a grudge, defending yourself, or just plain fuming. You get distracted. Your stress level soars. Your work suffers. You may even drink or smoke more.

Our physical health depends in large part on our emotional health. Emotional health depends on being able to feel your feelings and getting information from them in a way that lets you evolve from one position to another.

Feeling frustration with a coworker may be indicative of a larger issue, such as inequality, fear of conflict or fear of speaking your mind. It may also be that you are seeing a personality trait in this other person that reminds you of a parent, or even some denied part of yourself. The key in all these cases lies in taking your frustration, examining it at the deepest level (usually the belief system at stake), and then finding a way to evolve it into something constructive.

CREATING BETTER REALITIES

One of the most common beliefs we share, particularly in conflict situations where we feel threatened, is the belief that someone is “doing something to us.” In this victim model, we see ourselves at the mercy of someone else, so when conflict erupts, a lot of emotional energy goes into blaming the other person and justifying our own position.

By contrast, in a co-creative model (where we see ourselves as creators of our own lives), we carefully consider how we have magnetized and helped create the experience, and then, without blaming or berating ourselves, take responsibility for our blind spots.

Perhaps we have a deep fear of losing our job. We may magnetize an experience (say, by making a stupid mistake) that throws our value into question. This feeds our fear and leaves us desperate for some way to justify our value. We may expend a lot of energy trying to find advocates in the office and getting people to take sides with us. Ultimately, this will cause dissension and may cause us to lose people’s respect — the exact opposite of what we wanted.

If, on the other hand, we sit down and go over the experience in depth, seeing the places where our fear has control, we may come to a different understanding of the problem. We may perceive that we drew this experience to us just to show us what our fear was. We can then address the fear by honestly exploring where it came from and what might have triggered it (layoffs at the office, a sense that our skills are outdated, knowing we are in the wrong line of work, etc.).

By owning our part in a conflict, we own our emotions. Those emotions can then evolve and transform themselves into useful energy — energy that can be used to solve the real problem.

Once we are clear about what we feel, and once we have privately expressed those feelings, we are much more capable of reengineering our beliefs and drawing a better experience. Perhaps that is a better working relationship or recognition of a job well done. Perhaps it is a long-desired career change that sends us off on a new path altogether.

The next time an office conflict rears its ugly head, resist the opportunity to lop it off at the neck. Instead, look it in the eyes and see if you can’t see some small part of yourself staring back at you. ●

Cat Thompson is an author, teacher and facilitator specializing in the dynamics of emotion. She can be reached through www.emotionaltechnologies.com.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO RESOLVE A CONFLICT

Write down everything you are feeling. Be honest. If you want to smack your coworker, write it down. Once it’s on paper, it loses its power so you won’t be directing any violent energy toward another.

Look carefully to see what emotions may have magnetized this experience to you. Are you afraid? Angry? Feeling competitive? Feeling ignored or devalued? Your feelings will tend to magnetize precisely the experiences that will force you to feel them.

Once you are clear why you are feeling the way you are feeling, give yourself the time and space to feel and fully express it in private. Write, rant, scream, punch pillows. This allows the emotion to rapidly transform itself into useful, creative energy.

Prepare to feel some awesome power and conviction surging through your body. When emotional-release work is done correctly and with honesty, the payoff is tremendous.

When you feel clear, examine any root belief systems that came up for you (e.g., “Work will always be hard” or “I’ll never be good enough”) and see whether you are ready to evolve or replace any of them.

YOU KNOW IT’S RESOLVED WHEN ...

- You don’t need to make anyone else wrong so that you can be right.
- You have no overt or covert desire to make the other person “pay.”
- You are not holding any lingering resentment and can be happy and open with the person after the conflict is resolved.