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Equipping, Enabling, and Encouraging Marketplace Leaders

So You Want to Fight!

Handling Arguments in the Workplace

A four-year old fighting with a sibling over the use of a particular toy is expected. When an argument breaks out in the office over the use of equipment, who gets which sales territories, what business strategies are right, or any of the many other things that occur every day in the workplace the enlightened leader needs to know how to handle conflict.

Constructive vs. Destructive

Some arguments are necessary. They occur between smart business people who make important business decisions. The “argument” is an airing of the opposing views held by each party. These arguments are constructive in that they allow people to openly discuss their opinions and make decisions. Some people call these arguments “brainstorming.”

Arguments cross the line, becoming destructive when they become emotional attacks. Here are fourteen common reasons that constructive discussions turn into destructive arguments:

- 1. We are argumentative.** Some people have learned to be argumentative. They are more comfortable arguing than agreeing. They argue for the sake of argument, rather than for resolution of conflict.
- 2. Mountains out of molehills.** Failure to define major issues often leads people to make mountains out of molehills. If major issues are clearly defined there is less of a tendency to try to make a small issue into a major cause of disagreement.
- 3. Emotions versus reason.** When emotions take over reason is often compromised. Some people have “flare” tempers; some have “smolder” tempers. Either way, if you’re observant, you should be able to spot the individual whose emotions are about to take over.



4. Premature decisions. In group situations, there is often someone who wants to “get it over with quickly.” Avoid this temptation. Work that is hurried often leads to more arguments rather than fewer.

5. Hearsay. Making decisions based on hearsay or gossip will lead to many unnecessary arguments. Most of us learned this valuable lesson the hard way. Try telling someone that you’ve heard they are not good at their jobs, that they are not team players, or that they are not good managers and see what happens!

6. Stepping out of bounds. Yielding to someone else’s expertise may be difficult but necessary for smooth business operations. There will be times when you have strong opinions but not the expertise necessary for truly informed decision making. When you try to force your “opinion” over the “facts” of the expert many needless arguments will occur.

7. Taking matters personally. Criticism is a natural and important part of the continual improvement process. Unfortunately, many people take criticism as direct attacks on their person and strike back with emotional arguments.

8. Acting on generalities. When you say, “You must learn to do better.” you invite arguments. Whenever people speak in broad generalities, they create opportunities for misunderstandings and disagreements.

9. Hindsight. Hindsight has perfect 20/20 vision. While the idea of learning from past mistakes is valuable, it can become destructive and lead to arguments when the comment starts out, “If only you had...things would have turned out better.”

10. Not considering others. In any discussion, it is important to get people’s opinions on the table early. Otherwise, some people tend to stay quiet until they can’t bear it anymore and the resulting explosion sets off a chain reaction of arguments.

11. Private Agendas. Some people will always come to a meeting with a private agenda. At some point in the meeting, they will try to impose their private agendas on the group. For example, the purpose of your meeting is to discuss sales strategies, when someone blurts out a disgruntled comment about the sales strategies being inconsequential compared to the recent budget cuts. The “budget cuts” being the private agenda that can very easily distract a meeting.

12. Personalities. Personality conflicts often color perceptions. If I like someone, I tend to agree or at least be more sympathetic to their point of views. If however, I despise and dislike someone I tend not to give much credence to their ideas. Coloring perceptions based on personalities often leads to unnecessary arguments.



13. I'm most important. The boss's opinion often gets ten votes to everyone else single vote. A strong-willed person can often force their opinion on others, but this usually leads to tempers and arguments.

14. Needless blabber. Sometimes discussions take on a life of their own. Arguments are occurring for the sake of the argument. The game is, "Who can win the argument?" Sometimes a leader must simply know when to shut off discussion and move to a point of action.

Sources of Organizational Conflict

Most of these fourteen points have a common thread—emotions. When emotions take control over reason hostility increases and hostility is the breeding ground for arguments. If you can keep emotions in check, you can avoid most of the destructive arguments that occur in the workplace. When a four-year old screams her head off because her brother has "borrowed" one of her toys she is not acting out of concern for the toy but from an emotional state that says she doesn't want to share. People in business are not that much different.

James writes, *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that do battle within you? You want something but cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight"* (James 4:12).

The word "desires" comes from the root word for hedonism; the idea that pleasure is the chief goal of life. Our natural inner desires are focused mostly on ourselves; my ideas, my feelings, etc. According to James this inward focus on pleasing ourselves is what causes fights and quarrels.

Conflict Resolution

Eventually you will be in the middle of a conflict. Friends will put you in the middle, peers will ask you to referee, employees will ask you to resolve an argument, or someone will storm into your office purple with rage about one thing or another.

You have two choices; run away, or deal with the conflict. Unfortunately, many managers opt to run away. They do this by:

- **Ignoring the situation** (procrastination) hoping that in time the problem will pass,
- **Dealing with minor issues** (avoidance) leaving the major issues to work themselves out, or,
- **Dealing with side issues** (transference) that are not part of the real conflict at all.



If one of these three approaches appeal to you consider Jesus' words, *“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand”* (Mat 12:25).

Neither will a company divided against itself stand. If the arguments in your organization are not dealt with they can lead to conflict that will decrease productivity, increase turnover, and worst of all, cause the demise of the company.

Here are four Biblical principles for dealing with workplace arguments:

- **Diffuse the bomb.** Proverbs 29:22 says, *“An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.”* You cannot begin to resolve an argument until tempers are cooled. To begin with, never tell an angry person not to be angry. Don't lecture or talk down to the person. Ask questions, and listen. Empathize by repeating what has been said. Emotions run very high and are likely to rise at any point in the resolution process.
- **Get the facts.** Don't ever try to resolve an argument based on hearsay, opinion, or gossip. Deuteronomy reminds us, *“One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses”* (Deuteronomy 15:19). Take the time to gather the facts of the situation directly from the individuals involved before making any judgments in the matter.
- **Confront in private.** Praise in public, criticize in private. Whenever you are attempting to resolve conflict the matter should be dealt with in private. Never, ever begin what looks like an “interrogation” on the factory floor in front of other workers. *“Discuss the matter with him privately. Don't tell anyone else, lest he accuse you of slander”* (Proverbs 25:9-10). Jesus also offered instruction in this matter, *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over”* (Mat 18:15).
- **Negotiate a resolution.** There will be times when someone is clearly right and another wrong. But more often there will be shades of gray where there is some “rightness” in both sides. When this is the case, it is important to come to a negotiated resolution. Both sides need to agree on the outcome. In cases where someone has been emotionally hurt there needs to be confession and forgiveness.

When Negotiations Fail

Despite your best efforts, there will be situations and people with whom no settlement agreement can be reached. The Bible gives us clear direction for dealing with these situations:



Jesus said, *“But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’”* (Mat 18:16). The use of neutral outside parties to deal with conflict resolution can be a very important part of your ability to reach resolution.

If the use of neutral parties fails to bring about a resolution to the conflict, then the relationship may need to be broken off. *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector”* (Mat 18:17).

In the workplace, this does not necessarily mean firing someone. It may mean that the person is taken off a work team, or receive some other sanction as is appropriate. While this may seem harsh, it can be the best thing for all concerned. If the individual finally recants, there may be an opportunity for true confession and forgiveness. This can lead to full restoration.

Paul’s Example

Paul provides us an excellent example of handling difficult arguments in Acts 15. In this situation, some men from Jerusalem were teaching brothers that they needed to be circumcised to be saved.

Paul and Barnabas disagreed with this, so they traveled to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders (gathered facts). Then they went to the source of the conflict, the Pharisees, and asked them directly about what they had said (no gossip or hearsay). Paul and Barnabas then had many discussions with the Assembly regarding the bigger issue, what must a believer do to achieve salvation. Paul convinced them that salvation came from “the grace of our Lord Jesus.” Not from following man’s laws.

Paul brought about a compromise with the legalists in a letter that was sent to the Gentiles to give them direction. The letter gave the Gentiles direction in four areas; not to eat meat sacrificed to idols, avoid sexual immorality, not to eat meat with blood in it, and not to eat blood apart from the meat. The result of the letter was, *“The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message”* (Acts 15:31). Paul’s diplomacy diffused tempers, resolved conflict, righted a wrong, and provided direction and encouragement to everyone involved.

One Final thought

James continued his discussion on fights and quarrels saying, *“You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures”* (James 4:2-3).



Consider James' admonition the next time you feel your temperature rising. Ask yourself, "Where is my focus right now? Is it on God and what He wants for my life? Or is my focus on me and what I want?" If you don't have what you want perhaps it is because your focus is not on God.

Conflict in organizations may be inevitable. But decide today that no conflict will begin with you because you pushed God out of your life so you could focus on your selfish desires.