



**Dear Friends and Clients,**

Lisa is a talented writer who has been recognized for the creative ways in which she communicates her company's messages. But despite her talent for broadcasting corporate news, Lisa has not always been able to communicate with her coworkers.

When Lisa sought help through coaching, she was preoccupied by the conflicts that she routinely experienced with colleagues. She pushed hard to produce excellent products and felt frustrated when working with people who, she believed, didn't share her standards and vision. Lisa said that she often came home from work feeling exhausted, not from creating her projects as much as from the stress of dealing with her less-than-perfectionist coworkers.

Today Lisa is happier because she started a big change in her work life when she learned better ways to deal with relatively small conflicts. And in this issue I will discuss some of those techniques for more effectively managing conflicts at work.

Warm wishes, Bev

**Learn to Manage Small Conflicts  
To Remove Big Stress From Work**

November 17, 2009 \* Number 115

When clients start talking about conflicts at work, I first explore whether they are caught in a situation involving harassment, bullying or a toxic environment. Often we discover, however, that their suffering does not stem from one of those extreme situations. Instead, many people feel like they are miserable because of ordinary colleagues bumping against one another in a normal professional environment.

If you feel like the endless petty conflicts are taking the fun out of your professional life, here is some good news: you have the power to change the way you interact with your colleagues. Consider these strategies for better managing conflict:

- **Focus on the project.** Some conflict is inevitable and even positive. The give and take can help the team explore new ideas and work through the options. The trick is to resist making it personal. Even if the other guy tries to make it about you, stay calm and keep bringing the conversation back to the project under discussion.
- **Lead with the positive.** If your colleague's proposal is only half right, don't begin your comments with an attack on the flaws. Start out by focusing on the strengths of the work, then suggest ways to improve it. For example, you might say something like: "You did a great job of handling X, and it might be even stronger if you add some Y."
- **Avoid generalizations.** If you feel it is important to voice your views or complaints, avoid broad statements and concentrate on the facts. For example, instead of saying, "you are always late," say something like, "we are off schedule because your draft was two days late."
- **Let it go.** Tactless comments, mild slights and rude behavior often say more about the person who is speaking or acting than about you. And sometimes what makes them so annoying is not the events themselves as much as the way you keep thinking about them. Ask yourself whether your repetitive thoughts are prolonging your pain, and consider whether you can just move on.
- **Listen deeply.** When conflicts begin, it is tempting to stop listening and start planning your defense. If you find your mind wandering, try to focus on what others are saying. Sometimes you can calm the atmosphere simply by genuinely listening to your adversary. Consider restating your colleague's concerns to show that you really heard them. Demonstrate that you understand your opponent's viewpoint, even if you don't agree.
- **Apply a 3-part test.** If you are hearing a complaint or criticism, pause before you react to the unfairness of it all, and ask yourself these questions:
  - Is the comment really about the speaker's own problems, and thus might it be ignored?
  - Is some small part of the criticism – even 5 percent – actually true?
  - If a small part – that 5 percent – is indeed true, is there a way you should modify your position or behavior?
- **Don't gossip or malign.** Focus on the facts if it is relevant to a project, but don't trash your colleague to people who are not involved in the conflict. If you attack a colleague's character, it could haunt you later.
- **Give in gracefully.** If you do lose a point, don't sulk or turn passive aggressive. Earn some goodwill from the situation by being a good sport and

showing that there are no hard feelings. If you make a deposit in the office goodwill bank, you are more likely to win next time.

- **Seek mediation.** Don't run to your supervisor with every little thing, but consider asking for help when you are having trouble working out a problem. Don't just vent but ask the mediator for assistance in resolving specific issues.

**Want To Read More About Managing Conflict?** If you feel that you aren't good at facing and resolving differences of opinion, consider Tim Ursiny's book, "**The Coward's Guide to Conflict – Empowering Solutions for Those Who Would Rather Run Than Fight.**" Ursiny argues that conflict can be a good thing, and facing up to it may help your professional performance and your state of mind. The book is a useful workbook, with lots of questions for reflection and exercises that may help you to stop obsessing about conflicts and start moving forward.

**Want More Insights Related to Your Work Life?** In addition to providing executive coaching, Bev is available to speak to your group about a broad range of issues related to productivity and leadership. [For reviews of helpful books and an extensive archive of Bev's newsletters, visit her reorganized website at \*\*www.ClearWaysConsulting.com.\*\*](#)