



Bridges A monthly eZine from Meridian Consulting, Inc.

Building Bridges to Success -- October 2003

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Thought for the Month: *"Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."* Will Rogers

Spotlight on Conflict: *Don't Fall Into the Termination Trap*

Conflict in the workplace is natural and unavoidable, but when issues and differences are not resolved in a manner that meets the needs of all parties, they will escalate and so will the associated costs. There is a growing trend for workplace disputes to escalate into legal action. Research by the Rand Corporation (Brim, 2001) revealed the following:

- \$700,000 is the average jury award in a wrongful termination action.
- \$2,700,000 is the average amount of "punitive damages" awarded in employment cases.
- \$6,400,000 is the average amount of punitive damages awarded in racial discrimination cases.
- 80,000 discrimination charges are filed annually with the Equal Opportunity Commission.
- 15,500 sexual harassment charges are filed annually.
- \$38,000 is the average claim paid out for a sexual harassment charge.
- The employee wins 70% of the cases that go to a jury.
- Damages are awarded in 55% of all claims filed.

As the relationship between employer and employee continues to evolve, it is also becoming more complex. There is an increasing amount of legislation and court findings that expand employee rights and shift the burden of proof to the employer. The effect is often divisive, resulting in complicated grievance and progressive disciplinary processes that mandate formality and preclude any opportunity for informal resolution. These processes lead to win/lose situations that frequently entrench positions, rather than seeking solutions.

Everyday supervisors and managers act as agents of their employer as they discipline and evaluate the performance of staff. Each year more than 40,000 employment suits are filed, and 23% of those lawsuits are based upon a claim of “wrongful termination.” In most cases, the termination comes after a protracted and procedurally burdensome tug-of-war over performance, skills, or compliance issues.

Businesses have a window of opportunity to avoid the termination trap. Typically, issues begin as small problems, which if addressed early, openly, and proactively would result in a different outcome.

Businesses that build proactive and integrated systems for managing conflict, and minimizing the negative impacts of conflict, are laying the foundation for long-term financial success. Integrated and proactive Conflict Management Systems resolve disputes before they escalate, and build a more collaborative work environment in the process.

A recent study of Human Resource professionals found that they are beginning to employ more proactive alternatives to progressive discipline and termination. These alternatives include:

- **Fact Finding:** Using neutral third parties to document and/or investigate, not only builds a record, which is in the best interests of both parties, but it also helps eliminate the emotion that often clouds an issue and thereby moves the parties to developing a mutually agreeable solution.
- **Peer Reviews:** This offers opportunities to employers and employees alike.
 - Provides a forum for employees to raise issues and provides the employer with an opportunity for addressing concerns directly, minimizing the rumor mill.
 - Increases the involvement of employees in the management of the business, which in turn increases motivation and improves accountability.
 - Increases the voice and involvement of employees both vertically and laterally.
- **Mediation:** A neutral third party who is trained in mediating workplace disputes. The result is a negotiated agreement that promotes a mutually determined solution that promotes the interests of both parties and promotes collaboration.
- **Arbitration:** Arbitration is a more formal form of mediation that is binding on the parties. It is frequently encouraged as an alternative to formal legal action and is finding its way into more and more contractual agreements.

Conflict is a significant business issue that has a direct and very negative impact on productivity and the bottom line. Violence, anger, and legal action capture the headlines and the attention; but they are merely the most attention grabbing outcomes of a larger business issue.

Business is conducted by people and between people. Conflict is a natural outcome of human interaction. When it is resolved by meeting the needs of the parties, it

builds bridges. When it is resolved by the application of power or by determining who is right and who is wrong, it builds barriers. Be a bridge builder.

Conflict Services: *Unresolved conflict in the workplace is costly. When issues and differences are not appropriately addressed, they will escalate, and so will the associated costs.*

Meridian can help your business improve its ability to reduce workplace conflict and limit its negative impact through proactive programs of *Intervention* and *Prevention*.

- **Intervention:** Meridian works to reduce and resolve internal conflict situations between individuals, teams and business units, and works with external parties to ensure disputes in important business relationships are resolved in a positive manner through *Mediation* and *Integrated Conflict Management Programs*.
- **Prevention:** Meridian works with clients to develop ongoing, proactive programs that help build awareness of underlying issues that contribute to conflict, and build skill sets to help people effectively deal with conflict situations through *Training* and *Business Coaching*.

Meridian consultants provide targeted solutions and best practices, from multiple industries, to increase your organization's ability apply appropriate *intervention*, and develop *prevention* programs that are tailored to your business needs.

*Contact us today for a free consultation to discuss
how Meridian conflict intervention and prevention services can benefit you.*

Tel: (925) 258-0304

Email: info@meridianconsultinginc.com

Visit us on the web at: www.meridianconsultinginc.com

Coaches Corner: *Talk to Them--Don't Avoid It*

Providing timely and honest feedback is one of the most difficult management responsibilities and it is one that is often avoided. When that happens, the problem will grow and multiply. Here is a typical scenario:

You assign a task to someone. They fail to deliver or fail to meet your expectations. You can either express your disappointment and expectations for improvement, or you can ignore it. Sometimes, it seems easier to ignore it, but in doing so you have tacitly approved of the result. Continued poor performance will make you resentful and angry, and the negative emotion continues to build. That emotion will alter your perception of that individual, and you will come to believe that person is not willing to improve or change. You may even decide it is just easier "to do it yourself," adding not only to your workload, but to your stress level and emotional baggage as well.

After a period of time, the pressure builds and you will unload. The subordinate will typically be surprised at the emotion and anger that is directed their way, and will become very defensive. They feel justified in their position, because if it were a big deal, you would have said something earlier or imposed consequences of some kind. Now they blame you, instead of focusing on what they should be doing. Escalation will likely follow, and it rarely leads to desired results.

Why would managers avoid giving feedback if it produced these negative results? Because it is difficult to give constructive feedback, even under the best circumstances. Managers are human, and will avoid giving feedback to:

- Steer clear of making others or themselves uncomfortable.
- Prevent conflict or confrontation.

If you have avoided giving feedback for any of these reasons, you are not alone. Some subordinates will make it as difficult as possible to give constructive feedback, they will deny, lie, or blame others, rather than take responsibility for their actions.

Here are two things you can do:

1. **Manage Yourself for the Best Results** – *Accept the responsibility for your actions and understand how they affect your ability to effectively manage others.*
 - Accept the responsibility for giving timely and constructive feedback, and do it.
 - Identify the reasons you avoid giving feedback, and understand the consequences of not doing so.
 - Practice role-playing to help you deliver constructive feedback to difficult people in difficult situations.
 - Give positive feedback as well. It helps at three levels: 1) It helps you practice giving feedback in general. 2) Subordinates learn not to fear you, when you say, "I need to talk to you." 3) It sends a message that you pay attention to what is going on, and that you value what is done well and correctly.
 - Model the behavior you expect from subordinates.
2. **Manage Others for the Best Results** – *Give subordinates every chance to succeed.*
 - Give timely feedback. Don't wait for a more "convenient" time.
 - Give constructive feedback, be direct, specific, and non-punishing.
 - Accept that the subordinate is responsible for his or her own actions.
 - Accept that it is the subordinate's choice on how they choose to respond to feedback.
 - Always, follow-up. It creates accountability.
 - Solicit their feedback as well.

Every manager, at every level of the organization, is judged by their ability to achieve results through the efforts of others. When you give timely and constructive feedback, you give people the opportunity to be successful. Your feedback is too important, not to share. Giving effective feedback is the foundation for creating a work environment that is open, proactive, and accountable.

Business Coaching Services: *Success Strategies for Working With Others*

Meridian specializes in working with business people to develop and enhance leadership competencies in *networking, influence building, decision-making & problem solving, effective delegation, constructive relationship management, and self-management*. Coaching benefits a range of individuals:

- The person who has just been promoted or has stepped up to a new level that requires different skill sets.
- The promising individual who is being held back by one or two challenges.
- The person who wants to re-engage a career or transition to a new one.
- The focused person who needs accelerated development in a specific area.

Our business coaches provide *objective, confidential, and knowledgeable* support for our clients. Our coaches have extensive experience in helping business people acquire new skill sets, see things in a new way, internalize new behaviors, and overcome the obstacles that prevent them from achieving the desired results.

If you or someone you know would benefit from working with a coach, contact us today for a free consultation to discuss your business needs.

Tel: (925) 258-0304

Email: info@meridiancoaches.com

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