

No more Mr nice guy!

How debate & disagreement in the workplace can actually lead to better results...



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Do you value friendly relations with your co-workers? Are you proud of being a nice person who would never cause trouble in the workplace? Unfortunately, you might be just as responsible for work place conflict as your more argumentative co-workers.

Sure, pulling your punches might help you maintain your self-image as a nice person, but you do so at the cost of getting your alternative perspective on the table; at the cost of challenging faulty assumptions; and at the cost of highlighting hidden risks. That's a high cost to pay for nice.

Anytime people work together, conflict is going to arise from time to time, even when the dynamic between staff is good. It's a natural occurrence and can be effective for problem solving and also enhance interpersonal relationships.

If you are like many people, you will avoid conflict in your daily work life. There are many reasons why people don't stand up for their beliefs and bring important differences to the table. Conflict is usually uncomfortable. Many people don't know how to participate in and manage work conflict in a positive way. In a poorly carried out conflict, people sometimes get hurt. They become defensive because they feel under attack personally. People have to work with certain people every single day, so they are afraid conflict will harm these necessary ongoing relationships. Here are some of the benefits that conflict can bring to your practice;

It sparks healthy debate and competition, when people can argue about which direction to take or how to resolve an issue, you avoid the blind agreement that characterises groupthink. It stirs up the team culture where differences of opinion are the norm and employees are encouraged to think, not sit idly through a staff meeting not having any input. If an idea looks like it won't work, let debate sort it out – don't just cut it down immediately.

It results in better understanding of others; when you air your differences, you learn why other people think the way they do – and this might change your

own mind. At the very least, the discussion can provide new insight into another person's approach and beliefs, even if you continue to disagree.

It strengthens the team when you work through conflict; either in the sense of surviving it together when it comes at you from outside, or in the sense of overcoming it within the group. The team ends up stronger and more productive.

It gives everyone a voice in decision-making; making sure no one feels left out, thereby enhancing commitment and engagement. Employees should be encouraged and not have any fear of ridicule when expressing their opinion.

It allows constructive change. Well-reasoned disagreement, especially when the dissenter stands by it, can result in improvement not just for one project, but for subsequent ones as well.

It short-circuits worse problems. Rather than allowing resentment to fester into something truly dangerous, properly handled conflict allows individuals to resolve their differences before they explode.

If you experience little dissent in your group, examine your own actions; if you believe you want different opinions expressed and want to avoid „group think,“ and you experience little disagreement from staff, examine your own actions. Do you, non-verbally or verbally, send the message that it is really not okay to disagree? Do you put employees in a „hot seat“ when they express an opinion? Do they get „in trouble“ if they are wrong or a predicted solution fails to work?

If business goals are aligned and all employees are moving in the same direction, healthy work conflict about how to get there is respected. If you are a Practice Manager or Practice Owner, do this by asking others to express their opinion before you speak your own. Tell people that you want them to speak up when they disagree or have an opinion that is different from others in the group.

Neither all-out warfare nor colorless groupthink serves you well in business. But dominant species or not, human beings remain products of nature – and nature rewards those who strive the hardest for the betterment of the group.

So within specific guidelines, allow your people some level of conflict within their work lives. Careful handling of honest disagreements can inject a much-needed breath of fresh air into the workplace atmosphere. ♦

Pam McKean is a Director of AB Dental Employment Agency. The company has been in operation for over 15 years. Over the last 10 years AB Dental has grown into one of the country's leading recruitment agencies for the dental industry, servicing all sectors from government, corporate and private practice.

Currently, AB Dental services over 1,200 businesses with recruiting services including supply of temporary, contract and permanent employees. As professional recruiters, AB Dental can manage as much as little of the recruitment process as required, even if only providing advice.