

Management's conspiracy of silence



Getty Images

Supportive candour can foster open dialogue, promote effective conflict resolution and avoid the distinct smell of rotting fish at the boardroom table, author Chuck Bolton says.

Allison Graham, *Financial Post* · Thursday, Feb. 11, 2010

At the recent Human Resources Professional Association's National Conference in Toronto, Chuck Bolton, author of *Leadership Wipeout-The Story of an Executive's Crash and Rescue*, shed some light on how HR executives can create positive, effective work environments that will lead to increased productivity, alignment and ultimately, profitability.

The key, according to Bolton, is to employ the principles of supportive candor to foster open dialogue, promote effective conflict resolution and avoid the distinct smell of rotting fish at the board room table. He claims the conspiracy of silence is an epidemic in the North American business culture and is the single biggest inhibitor to productivity in the workplace.

A supportive work environment addresses this difficult area of human resource management by clearly outlining expectations for interaction in the workplace. There are three essential principles in a supportive candor company: talk straight (meaning to constructively raise and discuss sensitive topics); give and receive real-time 24/7 feedback and encourage collegial collaboration.

These are easier said than done. The problem is that people are not comfortable with giving and getting feedback, especially when there are opposing views. It turns out that males are worse at addressing conflict than females with 80% of male executives being conflict averse.

Bolton explains that there are six responses to conflict. All, but one of them, offer a camouflaged solution:

- z Bullying — power through the problems and others
- z Passive aggression — pretend there is a solution
- z Removal — check-out of the situation to avoid dealing with it
- z Victimitis — blame others as you play the victim and look for sympathy
- z Persuasion — change your mind and let go of the situation
- z Engagement — people share their stories to create one shared story

Engagement is the most productive method to achieve resolution, yet many managers' inherent aversion to conflict means it is also the most often avoided. Bolton explains it's up to the senior leadership to set the expectation for effective engagement and insists clear "norms" need to be established to drive trust into the conflict resolution process.

He counsels clients to define behaviours for successful conflict resolution including:

No triangulation: There is a natural tendency for people to recruit others to their "side". As a manager or leader, participating in or allowing triangulation games will undermine the process.

48-hour rule: If you go to the manager with a problem about Sally or Jane, and within 48-hours do not talk about it constructively with that person, then it's your problem, not hers.

Togetherness: If you can't resolve the problem and come to me as the manager to act as the referee, all involved parties must come together.

Allowing situations to fester will ultimately sub-optimize a company's potential. "In this process there can be no 'indiscussables'. Employees need to feel comfortable that they can deal with any issues as they arise. The manager must ensure there are no rotting fish left on the table – the longer it takes to deal with problems the more they will stink. Few negative work situations get better when you give them time."

To stop conflicts from festering and getting out of control, Bolton recommends incorporating the principle of 24/7 feedback into your organization's daily repertoire. This will align priorities between management and employees and highlight high-performing dimensions and identify gaps in perception.

"Team leaders are typically dissatisfied with the performance of their team with a mere 20 per cent of CEOs expressing satisfaction. In our research at the Bolton Group, we've seen team members are even more critical and dissatisfied with the functionality at work and with the perception of reaching the company's potential."

Financial Post

Allison Graham is a business development consultant, keynote speaker and the author of Business Cards to Business Relationships: How to Build the Ultimate Network. Based out of London, Ontario, she can be contacted through www.elevatebiz.ca.

Read more: <http://www.financialpost.com/executive/hr/story.html?id=2550543#ixzz1CLVNNJpC>