

Going To The

For the third time this week, Susan, an administrative assistant in a Midwestern insurance company, finds herself in the same predicament. She has called the IT helpdesk to come to her boss's office to solve this week's problem. After a difficult time with the IT person, Susan thinks to herself that if the IT person makes one more sarcastic comment about her boss's inability to ever learn as much as his son has forgotten about his laptop computer, Susan thinks she will say something that is totally inappropriate!

The problem is this: Every time Susan's boss needs his laptop synched to his Pocket PC or when he can't access the knowledge management system, he asks Susan to call the IT help desk. The help desk works on a priority call system, and most people have to wait hours or days to get assistance. However, for executives, most of the IT team will personally come to help within an hour of Susan's call. The trouble is, they don't like it, and according to Susan, they take it out on her. Susan is upset when they are rude to her, but so far, she has kept it to herself. She also doesn't think it is right for them to make negative comments to her about her boss but then be really pleasant to him face-to-face. Susan is in a predicament, and it isn't getting any easier.

What's Going On Here?

Susan is involved in a subtle conflict with the person in IT. Susan doesn't think executives should get special treatment just because they are executives. She also feels that some of the problems they call the help desk to fix could be done by her boss,

if only he would stay around while the IT staff is working on his computer.

On the other side of this issue is the IT person who circumvents the IT process to be helpful to an executive but who may feel that everyone should really learn the basics of technology and who possibly resents the fact that Susan calls frequently and her

tone of voice implies that they must come immediately to fix the problem.

Each time this scene repeats itself, the resentment, hostility and anger that this conflict engenders grows stronger.

Workplace conflict, although perhaps unavoidable, can and should be dealt with in professional and effective ways.



Balcony

A Way To Deal With Workplace Conflict

by Elizabeth Black



Going To The Balcony

The Global Negotiation Project at Harvard University and authors William Ury and Joshua Weiss (www.thirdside.org) coined the phrase “going to the balcony” in their work on negotiation and conflict resolution. “Going to the balcony” is a way of looking at situations with detach-

ment and objectivity. It requires that a person mentally remove herself from the conflict and analyze both what is occurring and the tone and demeanor of each person involved in the conflict—metaphorically speaking—“going to the balcony” to view the scene from an external point of view. If Susan were to “go to the balcony,” she

could observe the interaction with her IT colleague and look at both her point of view and the other person’s point of view. She could then decide which way she should deal with this conflict.

Three Ways To Deal With Workplace Conflict

There are three basic ways to deal with any workplace conflict—avoidance, win-lose and win-win.

Avoidance

When Susan went to the balcony, she might observe that it is the IT person’s sense of humor, whether appropriate or not, that causes him to make sarcastic comments to Susan about her boss. Perhaps she will objectively determine that his sarcasm is just a flippant comment that he uses when he first approaches her work area and not laced throughout their encounter. Are these comments innocuous enough that Susan should just let them pass? Should she ignore the comments and avoid any escalation of this conflict? If she does, can she really let them go or do they cause her anger that must be dealt with? The balcony approach can help Susan determine how important dealing with this conflict would be to her.

Not every conflict is worthy of a full-scale conflict resolution approach. Sometimes it is fine to avoid dealing with the conflict. Avoidance is generally useful when the conflict is minor and will not escalate into something bigger or over an issue that will not significantly impact workplace performance or the achievement of business goals.

There are many situations in every workplace that will annoy people. The very diversity in the way people approach situations, which may be valuable to business, probably means that people will see things in conflicting ways. When it seems like it is “small stuff,” take the oft-repeated advice and “don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Win-Lose

When it isn’t “small stuff” or the conflict can escalate into something bigger, there are two ways to deal with it: win-lose and win-win. Win-lose always implies that one party has power over the other. It may be the power of position or the power of influence.

If Susan went to the balcony to get a broader perspective, she may think about who holds the power here. In Susan’s case, she may hold a higher rank than the IT person. On the other hand, perhaps the IT person is a manager and Susan is not. Regarding influence, if Susan can influence her boss or other executives more easily than the IT person, she has influence power. In either case, the person with the power can most easily provoke a win-lose solution to the conflict.

Susan could tell her boss that the IT employee is being uncooperative and rude. If he chooses, he can then escalate this behavior to the help desk supervisor, and disciplinary action can be taken with the IT employee.

In most cases, win-lose can put an end to the battle, but perhaps not the war. Conflicts solved through win-lose have a way of coming back to haunt us. If Susan uses influence to win the battle, she may find herself in need of IT support at some time in the future, and she might not get it. Worse yet, suppose that her boss took a business trip and needed IT support and the helpdesk, conveniently, just wasn’t responsive because they were getting back at Susan. Win-lose strategies often turn

into lose-lose.

The benefits to Susan in win-lose can be significant, but the unintended consequences could be far more troublesome.

Win-Win

Suppose that Susan’s time on the balcony helped her think through a win-win strategy. A win-win solution to conflict implies both understanding and compromise. It has a solid foundation in open communication. In win-win, each party is able to express his feelings about the conflict and each is able to offer a possible solution. It is hard to argue when there is no opposition, and a win-win strategy looks for common ground rather than a winning argument. If Susan is open to hearing the other person’s point of view and willing to compromise on finding a solution, the two people can find a win-win solution.

While on the balcony, Susan might reflect upon the complete interaction with the IT person. She might observe that she thinks she is being business-like but her tone of voice comes across as arrogant or demanding. She might also observe that the IT person tells her boss that he can more easily fix the problem by sitting at his computer and he does so without explaining anything he is doing. Susan’s boss doesn’t want to waste time by standing around, so he multitasks while the IT technician is doing things he doesn’t even remotely comprehend.

Susan would probably see some obvious changes that each person could make to diffuse the conflict or even eliminate it altogether— if she can recognize the behaviors that are adding to the conflict and discuss them in a rational rather than a blaming way.

What might a win-win conversation look like? In our example, Susan might explain to the IT person that she gets angry when he is rude to her each time he is called to fix her boss’s computer problems but that she would like his help in solving the problem. Susan could then ask the IT person how she might be able to influence her boss to avoid these in-person, rush, troubleshooting visits.

Win-win always implies constructive dialogue, active listening and mutual desire for a satisfactory resolution of the conflict. Susan needs to weigh the benefits

and drawbacks of striving for a win-win solution, and her reflection and objective analysis, while on the balcony, can shed real light on the situation and the consequences of her actions.

A Useful Tool For Dealing With Workplace Conflict

“Going to the balcony” can take the emotion out of a potentially volatile situation and let reason and objectivity reign. It is useful whenever you would like a third-party, objective point of view, but you can create the situation without an actual objective observer— other than yourself, by “going to the balcony.”

Avoidance

- What business consequence could arise if you ignored the conflict?
- Are the business consequences a strong possibility or somewhat likely?
- What tactics could be employed to avoid this conflict?

Win/Lose

- Does one person have influence or position power over the other person?

Win/Win

- What does each person need to achieve satisfaction?
- What, if any, compromises might be considered?
- What language will you use to convey the facts and your feelings?
- What do you anticipate the response to your suggestions will be?
- What will your next steps be if the conflict is not resolved?

A Final Word About Susan

Once Susan solves her workplace conflict with the IT technician, can she have any influence on her boss’s behavior? Should she try? Perhaps she should “go to the balcony” to think about the situation.

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