

The Salt Lake Tribune

On the Job: Work conflict? Try their shoes

Anita Bruzzese
07/05/2008

The woman was annoyed that her co-worker seemed to take so long getting her part of the monthly report done. One day she became so irate that she lost her temper and lashed out: "You're always late and I'm sick of it. Everyone else can get their work done on time except you. You're being really inconsiderate."

This prompted an equally angry response from the co-worker, and from that time on, the two women barely spoke to one another. The tension was high, causing both women a lot of stress and adding to morale problems within the department.

Finally, the woman who became annoyed in the first place was called upon to cover for the second woman, who was absent because she was ill.

She was prepared to show that the monthly report could be done on time, but what she found was something completely different. She discovered that the woman's boss was the holdup - he had to wait on figures from distant sales offices, and that caused the whole process to be delayed. She learned that she had accused the woman of something that was beyond her control, and in the process, had caused hard feelings between them and affected an entire team with her outburst.

That scenario is typical of what Dr. Noelle Nelson (www.noellenelson.com) sees in her work as a psychologist who often is brought in to help employees learn to appreciate each other more.

"My observation is that people often do make things more difficult for themselves," she says. "If they would just see a situation from someone else's perspective, it could free them from a lot of stress and frustration and they could function better."

For example, Nelson says that she has been called in to help employees of different generations learn to get along better. While older workers may resent a younger boss being brought in, they should get beyond their own feelings of resentment and instead see that the younger boss probably worked very hard for that position, is very business savvy and can bring a lot of new ideas and strategies to the job that will benefit everyone.

At the same time, the new boss should put himself in the older workers' shoes, and realize that he may have a lot to learn from them because they have been in the business world longer, and may have experienced things that he has not.

"Both sides of the issue need to understand that everyone has something to offer," Nelson says.

(To join the blog discussion on this issue, check out www.anitabruzzese.com).

Still, the workplace is often a more difficult place to be day-in-and-day-out, partly because there is a much more democratic structure in place, where everyone plays an important role. No longer does one boss dictate what happens, but instead, everyone is required to work closely together in teams. That constant togetherness for eight hours or more a day can be a strain on workers, Nelson says.

"That's why it's even more important that you learn to see an issue from someone else's perspective," she says. "The world is not black and white. It's really shades of gray, and we need to understand there are other perspectives."

If you'd like to work on seeing something from another perspective and help relieve stress and improve relationships, here are some steps:

- * Take a deep breath. "When things are spinning out of control, and you're losing your cool, just breathe deeply. It can make a world of difference. It helps you really focus on what's bothering you," Nelson says.

- * Write it down. "If someone keeps interrupting you, then write that down. See if you can put yourself in this person's place and understand why he or she does that. If you're too annoyed, then think about it later. But try to see the situation from their perspective."

- * Try to deal with it on your own. "It's always more efficient to figure out ways to handle it, or to alleviate the stress, once you see where the other person is coming from."

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