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Conflict Management Part 2 – Destructive Conflict*By Scott E. Byorum, Nationwide Real Estate Tax Service, Inc.*

The meeting hadn't even started yet, but everyone in the room stared silently in morbid fascination at the battle ensuing before their eyes. It had begun innocuously enough: people taking their seats across from and next to each other, adjusting papers, reviewing notes, exchanging small talk, grabbing a cup of water...and then the two voices started rising. Debbie and Lynn were now standing up, leaning on the table towards each other. Their faces were screwed up in anger and their cheeks flushed as they insulted and shouted over each other at a decibel level just below screaming.

Debbie was the operations manager and Lynn headed human resources. As near as any innocent bystander could make out, Debbie was blaming Lynn for gross incompetence and an inordinate lag in hiring for a critical project she was running that was far behind schedule. Lynn was defending herself by claiming difficulty in finding qualified candidates, as she accused Debbie of blowing facts out of proportion and being impossible to work with.

"Nobody around here even likes you, you witch!" Lynn finally exploded in exasperation, as Tom, the manager, entered the room belatedly. The room fell dead silent and all eyes turned to Tom.

"The next time a scene like this happens, it's going in both your records," Tom said coldly and sternly. "I told you two to work it out. So work it out."

After the meeting, Debbie diverted another employee away from the critical project she was in charge of, the second time since it had started. "This will get Tom to put the heat on Lynn. I hope he fires her." Lynn sat in her office, fuming and shredding the last five resumes she received for Debbie's project...two of them qualified. "Embarrass me in front of everyone, will you? Now we will see who is incompetent."

This scene underscores the toxicity of Destructive Conflict. In a dysfunctional organization, these symptoms are rampant and ongoing, worming their way through projects and relationships. The battle between Debbie and Lynn is a classic example of Destructive Conflict getting out of control while at the same time remaining supported by the culture:

- The issue has been allowed to fester and grow. People are uncomfortable with tension, so they likely downplayed the issue from the beginning thinking it would resolve itself over time.
- As time passes without resolution, tension grows and blame increases between sides, causing entrenchment. Each side begins to prod the other into action while deflecting as much as possible the "stain" of blame. The "attacks" get more prominent and personal the longer the issue remains unresolved and the resentment will linger, fueling conflicts in future issues that arise.
- As other people become aware of the conflict, they try to stay out of it and remain silent, not wanting the issue to "stain" them. They attribute it as a "personality clash" or "not their

area of responsibility.” But this is a fallacy. Knowledge is involvement and promotes action. Choosing to remain out of things is an action, but it doesn’t dissolve involvement. However, choosing sides only serves in adding fuel to the fire and emboldens major players to take more overt, personal risks.

- When viewed as a “personality clash” by management and others, unacceptable behaviors can be overlooked or even tolerated. At this point, the desire to squash the conflict is strong, either by forcing the sides to work together amicably under threat of punishment, or by pushing them apart. The real issue has become incidental as sides rally for control and power.
- Egos are forced out into the open and people become possessed by an overwhelming desire to be right. They may find themselves engaging in the exact behaviors that they find repulsive in others, blinded by the perceived unreasonableness of the other side and wanting to expose it publically. Blame is the tool of shame and vindication and is employed at great lengths during Destructive Conflict.

The dysfunctional organization is driven and fueled by childish mannerisms and behaviors. Insider perceptions are largely clouded by the entanglement of the drama and the desire to protect oneself from harm or punishment. Being acknowledged as superior or right or aligned with the winning side becomes a motivating force. Having control and power becomes the highest commodity. But they are indeed all distractions to collaboration, production, innovation, growth and success.

All of the elements of Destructive Conflict can exist in an organization to various degrees and levels and support, and often behind the veil of politeness and pleasantries. But to the keen observer, they are as apparent on the schoolyard playground during recess as they are in the adult halls of government.

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