

More companies want problems hashed out in the open

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"Do as I say, because I said so" may fly with some 3-year-olds, but it's no way to manage an enterprise.

Consider the space shuttle Columbia disaster, plagiarism at The New York Times, and the fall of Enron. Each case ultimately unmasked a climate in which workers were too afraid to raise legitimate concerns to supervisors.

"Leaders who are aggressive and unapproachable are uncomfortable having issues placed on the table," says Howard Guttman, a Ledgewood-based consultant who specializes in helping companies address conflict in the workplace. "They operate with the illusion that no news is good news."

Guttman says there are similarities between The Times, Enron, and NASA. Investigations into the Columbia space shuttle's destruction found that NASA was so fixated on making its scheduled flights that safety concerns raised by low-ranking engineers got short shrift from top managers.

At The Times, rogue reporter Jayson Blair's fabrications led to the resignation of two top editors who were apparently oblivious to warnings about his lies and who were criticized as unapproachable.

And Enron Corp.'s infamous collapse is being blamed on a top-banana culture of greed that left plenty of workers and investors in financial shambles.

As the perils of a dissension-free workplace become more and more obvious, a lot of companies are stepping up their efforts to create office climates in which problems can be openly discussed.

Guttman is a management consultant who makes his living working with firms on a host of issues. Lately, he's seeing an uptick in business with companies that are willing to acknowledge and air differences of opinion among employees.

"More and more companies are looking at this but it's really not a big choice anymore because in today's marketplace, it's a fundamental core issue," says Guttman, who recently wrote "When Goliaths Clash, Managing Executive Conflict to Build a More Dynamic Organization."

"To keep businesses thriving in such a fast, competitive business cycle, the old system of having a hierarchy that functions on 'Because I said so' just isn't workable," Guttman says.

Gerard Kells is the vice president for human resources of the Medical Devices and Diagnostics Division of Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick. He was part of a senior management team that Guttman, a former J&J employee, worked with on ways to become "high performing." Kells

says some of what Guttman teaches about managing conflict is as basic as just taking the time to set some ground rules.

"If you have clarity about how things are going to be done and there's nothing hidden about how decisions are going to be made, it removes the potential for hard feelings on a personal level," says Kells. "It sounds so incredibly simple, but it's elegant in its simplicity."

Kells says that at a company the size of J&J, which has 12,000 of its 112,000 employees in New Jersey, it's imperative that various opinions get expressed.

"Making conflict healthy involves knowing that when you put a group of people together, no two are going to see things exactly the same way," Kells says. "In fact, we increasingly want to become more diverse, so looking at whatever we're doing from a very diverse point of view means you're going to have disagreement. It's keeping it about business and not personal that matters. I know that sounds like something out of 'The Sopranos,' but that's the reality."

Dysfunctional conflict, Guttman and Kells say, tends to occur when no rules for voicing opinions exist, and when managers fail to let their employees know it's OK to clear the air.

"If I'm a member of a management team and I come to my staff and say, 'Well, look, here's this decision that got made and I don't believe in it, and frankly, no one even consulted me,'" Kells says, "I'll get a very different result than if I come back to my staff and say, 'Look, after a long debate and discussion, this is the decision that got made and I stand by it.' People have to know there's a process and that there's input."

Judy Zagorski has come to see workplace conflict as something worth celebrating. She is the director of leadership and organizational effectiveness for Masterfoods USA, the company that makes M&Ms and is headquartered in Hackettstown and Vernon, Calif.

"In corporate America we're all going after the best and the brightest," says Zagorski, whose company has also worked with Guttman. "Having different points of view brings conflict, but without it you wouldn't have the best innovative ideas."

Guttman says that when top managers don't allow for dissension, more employees waste more time agonizing over feeling wronged or stifled than on getting work done.

"It's like 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' with leaders who just don't want to hear it," Guttman says. "Everyone else sees themselves as victims, and the company winds up losing valuable time, competitively."