

Women at Work: Conflict is opportunity, danger co-existing

MIMI BACILEK • March 23, 2010

Do you hate conflict? Do you want to avoid it? All you have to do is put your head in the sand. But beware. That posture exposes your backside to the world!

The Chinese symbol for conflict describes opportunity and **danger** co-existing. Spotting danger is easy. But your subconscious convinces you that addressing the conflict will only make it worse. The reality is that your subconscious is the enemy here; it sets a trap that limits your success. The opportunity lies in addressing the conflict.

Skillful leaders start by clarifying what you want to accomplish — how you'll know you're **successful**. Let's assume your goal is to have your colleague hold her people accountable. With that clarity, initiate a conversation to accomplish three things: describe the issue, understand why it exists and create a shared plan that achieves your goal.

Begin by naming the difficulty. "Sandy, I'm concerned. For the third week, Joe's information is late. The pattern is preventing us from meeting the **customer's** deadline. We risk losing the contract."

Next, be curious: Why is this occurring? Resist the temptation to assume Joe has a malicious intent or

judgmental question: "What's causing Joe to be late?" Be ready to address a defensive response. If it occurs, refocus on what the **customer needs**: "I'm sorry if I sounded accusative. That was not my intent. I want us to get the product to the customer on time. What's creating the delay?"

The third step: Based on what you **learn**, create agreement on a go-forward approach that addresses your concern and meets the customer's need. Then employ a Reagan strategy: trust but verify. Monitor that the agreement is followed. If it is not, re-start the process by acknowledging the gap between the agreement and reality and charting a new course forward.

With vigilance and courage, most workplace conflicts are manageable. Don't let fear restrain you — your **success** hangs in the balance.

Mimi Bacilek is an executive and leadership development consultant and can be reached at 585.227.0308 or mimi@successbuildersllc.com

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