

Tension of opposites drives workplace conflict

The workplace is full of different personalities and work styles, which inevitably leads to conflict. The story of Lisa, an administrative assistant, and Frank, her manager, illustrates different styles of work and how they create conflict.

Frank was a rather loud, extroverted person who talked to Lisa about her work in vague terms, using abstract words and big picture generalizations. He constantly tried to see how many ways there were to fit various pieces of the whole together. His natural inclination was to persuade someone to do something through his compelling explanations. Lisa would leave meetings with Frank wondering how she should proceed.

By her nature and job function, Lisa wanted a step-by-step pattern for getting the job done, and struggled to figure out how to schedule and meet deadlines. Her approach not only left Frank feeling boxed in but forced him into a debating mode of pros and cons. As a result, both began to feel inadequate and started to consider the other unprofessional.

The more Frank spoke from his frame of reference, the more Lisa withdrew. This made Frank not only speak louder to Lisa — she just didn't seem to understand what he had to say — but get closer to Lisa's face when he spoke, which made her feel unsafe.

Psychological type theory can help explain these differences in work styles. Frank was a passionate worker who enjoyed a competitive and stimulating environment where he could leap into the future, discovering new ways of doing things. Lisa was a determined, persistent and hardworking person who required time to reflect and desired a step-by-step process that could draw on her past experience and competencies.

■ GUEST COMMENTARY

DANIELLE GAULT

Opposite work styles can lead to major personality problems. When the HR department called for a mediation process between these two people, during a one-on-one session Lisa revealed she had been sexually abused as a young girl. The closer Frank got and the louder he became, the more Lisa's past memories and fears were triggered. Ultimately, the problem was never resolved and the company lost two good workers.

Psychological type theory indicates specific differences in ways we behave. The world, however, imposes its own requirements on us and often has opposite expectations for our behaviours. Tension is inherent in these opposite expectations.

When processing information, some of us tend to look at the trees, seeing specific, reality-based facts, while others look at the forest, seeing systems and overviews. As with Lisa and Frank, communication breaks down, leading to frustration and perhaps negative stereotyping. This leads to avoidance of each other and, eventually, workplace morale and productivity diminish.

Becoming positional about the way we get a job done can result in focusing primarily on our own needs at the expense of the other's needs. Frank, for example, became more argumentative and placed the blame of unresolved issues on Lisa. His pattern was designed to control the situation, to de-power the other person and maintain a position of being right.

Lisa, unable to overcome her natural introverted pattern, failed to stand up for herself and withheld feedback,

which only confused him. Frank, of course, had the advantage of not only being her boss but also being a strong, extroverted person, so she took a defeatist position. This pattern is designed to protect Lisa by avoiding confrontation in order to maintain her safety, but it also leads to unresolved conflict resolution. The feelings of being hard done by, abused and mistreated, however, can fester as unexpressed anger and the stored-up tension may express itself later in inappropriate ways.

By learning about personality differences and varied work styles, we can increase our interpersonal skills and our ability to stay in a problem-solving mode. This, combined with self-understanding of how to use the tension of opposite expectations for personal growth, requires the courage and willingness to:

- maintain objectivity and stay focused on the problem
- state our feelings by owning our thoughts about the differences in expectations and work styles — "I feel confused when you don't ask questions because I wonder if you understand me."
- request the other person involved suggest solutions — "How can we discuss our work in a way that would make sense to you?"

It isn't easy to confront differences but, through problem solving, we can transform the tension of opposite expectations into opportunities for personal growth, emotional maturity and increased productivity.

Danielle Gault is co-founder of D-B Reflections, an Oakville, Ont.-based health and human resources development company. She can be reached at (905) 844-2495. For more information visit www.management-training-services.com.