

Removing “Personal” from Interpersonal Tension

Tips on how to smooth out office tensions and problem-solve effectively in the workplace. **BY DONNY EBENSTEIN**



Donny Ebenstein is a partner with Consensus (www.consensusgroup.com) Consensus is a negotiation and conflict resolution firm that offers consulting, training and development, and international peace-building services to private and public sector clients throughout the world. If you have questions you would like answered, contact Consensus at 212.391.8100 or inquiry@consensusgroup.com.

Q.: “As the director of L&D, I am responsible for bringing in quality vendors to train our employees. I invest heavily in identifying the best providers, but once I do, I inevitably find myself battling our procurement department over money. How can I avoid repeating the same clash?”

A.: This situation is common in corporations around the world. Individuals or departments find themselves struggling with colleagues within their organization, in a dynamic that repeats itself.

It is important to understand the challenge here is not interpersonal per se, in that you are not having a personality conflict with a difficult individual. Rather, you are caught in “systemic tension” with your procurement colleagues. The dynamic you are experiencing is a function of the different incentive structures you and your colleagues are working under. Your primary motivation is to find quality programs and providers—that is how your clients evaluate your performance and is what ensures the training has maximum impact. In contrast, your procurement department’s primary incentive might be to reduce costs wherever possible—they are rewarded for reducing spending, and, therefore, have to be thoroughly convinced a higher expenditure is justified before approving the purchase.

What can you do?

- 1. Be aware of the systemic nature of the problem.** Repeating the same tug of war can create a lot of tension, and if it persists, it is only a matter of time before your relationship with your procurement colleagues becomes seriously damaged. To reduce the interpersonal friction and protect the relationship, remind yourself that your colleague is simply behaving the way the system has incentivized him or her to behave. Not only will this help you maintain a healthy perspective, it will be conducive to more creative problem-solving.
- 2. Be explicit with your procurement colleague**

about the systemic dimension of the problem. Try something such as, “I realize you are charged with keeping costs down, and you are simply doing your job when you talk to me about price. I see the importance of having someone look at vendor relationships through that lens. At the same time, I want you to see that my clients insist on getting the best possible quality. If, as a company, we focus only on price, we may end up with inferior vendors that, while cheap, provide poor service that adds little value to our business—a low return on investment. I’m sure you agree that would be a poor outcome, as well.”

3. Engage your colleague in joint problem-solving to address the issue. For example, you could say, “Given we both want to make sure we get high quality and a reasonable price, how do you suggest we balance these two needs?” Once you’ve solicited their input, they probably will be receptive to hearing your ideas.

4. Try to find a systemic solution to the problem. For example, the procurement department could work with learning and development to create a formula or matrix that incorporates both price and quality considerations, as a guide to selecting vendors.

If all else fails, you might have to escalate the matter to a more senior person, someone who is responsible for considering both sets of incentives. But even if you are pressed to do this, make sure to do so in a manner that doesn’t antagonize procurement and damage your relationship with them: “I respect your need to keep costs down, as I know you are trying to protect the company’s interests. I, too, am trying to protect the company’s interests, although I come at the issue from a different angle. Therefore, why don’t we get input from someone who can help integrate both of our points of view?” **T**

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