

Has the Workplace Become a War Zone?

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The nature of employment in the United States has gone through a sea change since the 1960s. While employees used to stay with a single employer until they were ready to collect their pensions, they are now almost expected to have several employers, if not careers, in their lifetimes.

Some attribute this to lack of employee loyalty. Others believe that scarcity of resources, pressure on profits, and outsourcing have led to the disappearance of the career-long employer. In either case, the increase in numbers of employee lawsuits, including growing numbers of class actions, leads to a growing concern:

Has the workplace become a war zone? If so, there are casualties on all sides.

From the perspective of a dispute resolver, there is both good and bad news. The good news is that employment disputes are not so complex that disputants have developed their own set of behavioral rules and negotiation theories. These disputes are driven by the same generic barriers to resolution that create and perpetuate most conflicts. The bad news is that the perception in the workplace of disparity of interests tends to generate more disputes.

While there may be some disparity of interests between employers and their employees, much of it is more perception than reality, a product of "zero sum" thinking in the workplace. Zero sum thinking is based on the perception that, in any given relation-

ship, there is only a fixed quantity of something, whether it be money, good will, or reputation. As in the game of poker, a zero sum thinker has concluded that, whenever someone gains in the relationship, someone else must lose.

There is nothing inherently wrong with zero sum thinking, so long as it is applied to zero sum situations. Where we get into trouble is when we apply zero sum theory to non-zero sum relationships, especially in the employment arena.

For example, when my two teenagers were 4 and 6 years of age, they would ride peacefully in the SUV, sitting side by side. However, whenever my son turned to his (younger) sister and said, "I'm looking out your window", she would get very upset. At age 4, she had already adopted a zero sum view of the world: the perception that her brother had gained something, a view out her window, led her to conclude that she must be losing something. Her confusion as to what she was actually losing served only to heighten her upset and the associated turmoil in the back of the car.

Adults often operate the same way. Due to economics in the workplace, some environments have become akin to a game of musical chairs, with every employee worried that they will be the next to lose the chair, whether it be in the form of continued employment or a performance reward. When someone receives "the chair" in the form of an accolade, promotion or raise in pay, others may feel

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that they have "lost" the same benefit. This phenomenon is enhanced in a workplace where recognition is conferred on the basis of perceived value as opposed to real value. Conversely and perversely, there is a dark side of this theory at play in the workplace: sabotage. Some feel that they will create personal gain by damaging others, thus looking relatively "better" than the one whose work or reputation was sabotaged. Those tempted to engage in this practice beware: in resolving disputes for almost 30 years, this mediator has never come across a situation where hurting one has helped another.

Zero sum thinking is but one barrier to more productive workplace relationships. Another barrier is the possibility that we have lost sight of the fact that the workplace is a relationship at all.

It is Not "Us" vs. "Them"

Employers and employees have lost sight of their common interests. Employers might be surprised to learn that workers are just as motivated by efficiency and productivity as they are. A significant morale generator is the sense that one's work is meaningful, or even appreciated, and that one's time and energies are being used productively. When an employer adopts the view that employees are "lazy" "takers," whose interests are adverse to efficiency and profit, the employer has stopped listening to the employee's views, needs, or suggestions. Accompany this with a workplace transition from *in loco parentis* where co-workers bonded as family, celebrating one another's birthdays, to a workplace of economic uncertainty in which workers feel like generic widgets, and the effect is exacerbated. There are casualties on all sides: employer, employee and even consumer as potential synergy is lost when a perceived gap develops between "labor" and "management." Lack of collaboration and communication may evolve into a more permanent alienation that reinforces stereotypes and inhibits the exchange of information that may be critical to both workplace process and outcome.

The Solution: create opportunities to learn which employee motivators relate to productivity and profit.

Sometimes Yes Costs Less Than No

When the workplace has devolved to an "us vs. them" mentality, there is a temptation by management to deny employee requests. This is only natural when requests are viewed as additional demands, a dynamic that is very well developed in labor negotiations. By rigidly refusing employee requests, employers may be missing an opportunity for gain. For example, in a heated contract negotiation, a performer may ask for a limousine to take her to her nightly performance. Many negotiators might view the limo as a costly concession and respond with a quick no. Such a reaction deprives management the opportunity to realize gain: it might be in the negotiator's interest to control the timeliness of the performer, management could benefit from the image of her arriving at the venue in a fancy limo, and the performance may benefit from a performer who is in a better mood because he or she feels more appreciated and cared for. The same approach may apply to requests for telecommuting, workplace dress options, and workplace conveniences as simple as onsite healthy snack machines.

The Solution: Before saying no to a request, ask the key question: "How could we gain from saying yes to this?"

Give Others the Benefit of the Doubt

Communication is rarely perfect, particularly in many workplaces. As a result, it is quite common to witness behavior for which there is no apparent explanation. In such circumstances, people often fill the information gap with a negative assumption – the brain must make sense of the world and therefore cannot tolerate information gaps. While filling the information gap with a negative assumption seems to be human nature, it stands to reason that

not all behavior is driven by negative intent. In fact, most behavior is probably driven by one's intent to be productive and meaningful. An assumption to the contrary may lead to deteriorating relationships and lost productivity.

Solution: When you observe something you don't understand, assume that the motivation for it was positive. You may be surprised by how often you are correct.

By the time a workplace dispute gets to a mediator, it may be too late to repair the damage. However, much may be learned from dissection of the origins of employment disputes that may be put to good use in a workplace that is designed to take advantage of that which drives employers as well as employees: a sense of productivity and relevance.

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