

How to Heal Workplace Disputes

Dear Conflict Doctor:

A few months ago my assistant of five years, Jennifer and I had a falling out. I had some tight deadlines and she kept making mistakes. One afternoon I said some things that hurt her feelings. I know I was condescending to her. We no longer joke like we used to I wish I had just dealt with the situation back then and now I am too embarrassed to talk about it. Maybe it is all in my head, but I'd like to get back to where we were before this all happened.

Yours truly, Peter

Dear Peter:

We have all been in this situation – personally or professionally. Often, we hope that the situation will just go away but in truth, it rarely does. What happens instead is that we all make assumptions about what happened and about the others involved. And these assumptions, whether accurate or not, drive our future behavior.

Although this is completely normal, if these assumptions are not dispelled they can cause conflict. Therefore, the key to resolving the problem lies in uncovering Jennifer's assumptions and setting the record straight.

How assumptions drive behavior

In order to uncover the assumptions, it is important to understand how they are formed. As we go through life we are continually making assumptions about the world and how it operates. Each experience builds your belief system that drives all that you do.

For example, if your boss rejects your idea several times, you will slowly stop putting ideas forward. This is because you have built a belief, whether right or wrong, that he is not interested in your ideas.

Your assistant, Jennifer, probably formed a number of assumptions about you when you treated her the way you did. These assumptions are likely causing her to treat you differently. Therefore, the key to resolving this dispute is to re-construct her assumptions.

How to re-construct assumptions

In order to reconstruct assumptions you must first allow them to surface. Jennifer needs both the time and the right circumstances to be able to open up and tell you what is really bothering her.

The best solution is to have a one-to-one conversation in a confidential and neutral location. Tell her that you are sincerely interested in repairing the relationship and explain how you feel. When she feels safe enough she will begin to open up. Be careful not to assume that she feels like you do and recognize the impact of power on her sense of safety. The key is in allowing her the space she needs to be able to say what she needs to say.



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