

Corporate Circles: Resolve Conflict with One Conversation

It seems that Gary has always been in conflict with his co-workers. Over the last four years he has changed departments four times. Gary was running out of places to go. The recent blow up was just another incident in a string of events that on their own would not have been cause for concern. But together, they caused what his colleagues began calling "a chilly work climate."

That's when Gary's supervisor called me.

Most managers hope that conflict will just go away – an often it does. But equally as often, conflict can go underground. Like a dormant volcano, un-addressed conflict can often cause eruptions in the most seemingly unrelated situations. And usually when you least suspect it.

These types of "eruptions" are signs of conflict that needs to be vented. If conflict is not dealt with appropriately it can lead to serious harm which often translates into poor performance, low morale and absenteeism. These simmering conflicts are a source of major irritation for managers because they are often buried deep. Therefore, a particular strategy must be employed.

First of all, managers must realize that no amount of prodding will evoke these feelings and that the only way they will emerge is in a completely safe place. Although a face-to-face meeting might seem like a quick fix, the power differential and work-related fears often cause employees to clam up and managers rarely get the real story.

So what is the solution? A Corporate Circle. This is a simple process by which a whole department or group get together to have a candid conversation.

Corporate Circles are based on a process called conferencing that emerged from the transformative justice movement in criminal law. In The early 70's several lawyers who dealt with juvenile crimes felt that a better solution than prison was a peer and community-based process. They found that when the perpetrator and the victims faced each other and shared their perspectives, the conflict was transformed. Conferencing worked so well that many countries around the world have introduced conferencing as part of their criminal justice systems.

Corporate Circles, like conferencing, bring together all of those people who are impacted by the conflict. It provides them with a safe environment in which they can share their perspectives on what has been happening in the workplace, and more importantly, how the conflict has been impacting them.

Because conflict is rarely just a dispute between two people, this process allows the whole group to work together to deal with the current conflict and also learn how their behaviour impacts others so that future conflict can either be prevented or resolved by individuals without any intervention.

One of the reasons why Circles work is because the process pays attention to the emotional and psychological aspects of conflict. A key component is to allow participants to express their true feelings, especially when negative. The process almost always results in an apology or two and a recognition by everyone in attendance that there are many perspectives to a particular situation.

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Corporate Circles can be used for two purposes — for groups in conflict and for groups that want to re-commit and reach higher levels. The benefits of Circles speak for themselves. Not only can they solve current conflict but they also empower employees to resolve future conflict on their own and build stronger work groups.



Maureen F. Fitzgerald, PhD, practiced law for over 20 years and is now dedicated to mediating conflict and facilitating meaningful conversations. She is the author of six books and the president of CenterPoint – a company dedicated to resolving conflict and building trusting teams. She has a business degree, two law degrees and has taught at two universities. Maureen consults across North America and can be reached at Maureen@CenterPointInc.com.

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[Note: Based on the Book: *Corporate Circles – Transforming Conflict and Building Trusting Teams* by Maureen F. Fitzgerald, PhD.]

