

MANAGING BOOKS: IDEAS

Gather round, and resolve a dispute

HARVEY SCHACHTER

Corporate Circles

By Maureen Fitzgerald

Quinn, 128 pages, \$19.95

Most workplaces deal with conflict by avoidance. The last thing most people want to do is to sit down and talk about it.

Print Edition - Section Front

*** SECTION C - HEALTH CARE, CS - ACADEMIC, CS ***

**Globe
Careers**



**Gather
round,
and resolve
disputes**

MANAGING
BOOKS, C3

THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.WORKOPOLIS.COM ■ WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 9, 2006



But Vancouver lawyer Maureen Fitzgerald -- borrowing from restorative justice principles used with juveniles and in the native community -- argues that the better tactic is to gather everyone involved in a circle and, with the help of a facilitator, discuss a problem and how to solve it.

"I have seen corporate circles work and I believe that circles can revolutionize the way we look at and deal with conflict," she writes.

Ms. Fitzgerald became adept at investigating flare-ups in the workplace, interviewing employees and writing detailed reports that helped to establish blame -- which fit the adversarial training she received as a lawyer. But she began to realize her investigations were not only failing to address many of the problems, they were also creating others.

She became intrigued with "conferencing," the restorative justice process by which offenders have a conversation with those they have harmed, and, together, come up with a solution. That allows both parties to move forward.

"As I brought people together in what I called corporate circles, they challenged their assumptions about others, they discovered hidden perceptions about what was happening, and they talked about their shared values and, particularly, the importance of fairness. I began to see empathy emerge naturally in each of the participants. As each person began to truly understand the impact of their behaviour on others, they truly saw things differently and began to treat others better," she says.

It sounds like a fairy tale -- too good to be true. But Ms. Fitzgerald is not naïve. After all, she is the one running these circles in workplaces, watching as divided colleagues try to move toward agreement on volatile issues.

She says we are deterred in dealing with conflict by five myths:

The dispute will blow over. In fact, although some conflict will go away, most merely goes underground.

It just involves one or two people. In reality, most conflict involves not only those who contribute to the conflict but also all of those who feel its impact.

Those involved just need to talk it out. Some, however, can't find the words to describe what they are feeling or even what happened in the conflict. And they may be overwhelmed by fear that anything they say will aggravate the situation. Even if they can articulate what went wrong, they will edit their remarks to such an extent that their true feelings aren't expressed. In that context, the disputants, alone, can rarely get to the root of the problem.

Emotions are dangerous. Most dispute resolution methods try to ignore or separate out emotions, which are seen as wild and destructive. But because the emotions aren't dealt with, the disputants retain that emotional baggage that can lead to future disputes.

We just need to control or remove the person responsible. But she contends punishment does not work in workplaces -- for the individual or the organization. People who are punished don't necessarily behave better, and the punitive correction model instills fear in everyone.

Instead, we have to accept that conflict will rarely go away on its own; it is rarely just a factual dispute; it is driven by hidden feelings; it usually

involves many people, as it ripples through the workplace; and punishment does not transform conflict or enhance empathy.

To solve conflict, three things must happen:

Diagnose the problem and uncover the hidden causes.

Come to a shared understanding about what happened.

Together create a solution.

Those are the steps of a corporate circle, as everyone affected gets together for a candid conversation.

The circle, guided by an outside facilitator, provides a safe environment in which everyone can share their perspectives on what has been happening and how to move on.

With everyone involved, the truth of what has occurred is more likely to emerge, even if it may take some time for somebody to name it. Then solutions can be proposed, and, when an agreement is reached, individuals sign a contract to adopt those new approaches.

The book provides guidance for running circles, to avoid them spinning out of control and to ensure their benefits can be felt. It's a clear and practical guide, covering everything from preparation to closing the circle, and an excellent start to deciding whether this approach can help you.

August 9, 2006