Conflict on the job a major issue for most workers

A recent survey by the training and organizational performance consulting firm Vitalsmarts found that 93 percent of workers are negatively affected by inability to deal with conflict on the job.

The Provo, Utah, company said 69 percent of workers avoid confronting co-workers on issues of accountability, and 50 percent say the reason they shy away from confrontations is that they are afraid of a negative outcome.

Some are afraid of making enemies in the workplace, others don't want to face up to an argument and others fear they will lose their jobs as a result of trying to deal with conflict.

"I'm amazed that at all levels of the company, people need conflict management skills and don't have them," says Nancy Helgeson, a career coach and psychologist in San Diego. "I call it 'the elephant in the room.' Everyone knows there is a problem but they won't talk about it."

Helgeson has found that many of her clients have conflict resolution problems, but don't realize it.

"The clients recognize the symptoms and often point the finger at others," she says. "They may think 'that person is impossible to work with' and so they just avoid working with that person. The real problem is that these two people need to resolve their conflict."

Most don't, as the Vitalsmarts survey shows.

"Part of the reason is a lack of confidence," says Joseph Grenny, president of Vitalsmarts and author of the book "Crucial Conversations." "People feel that they don't have the skills to resolve the conflict, so they try to just ignore it."

The repercussions can be devastating. Inability to deal with conflicts means that problems go unresolved, workers are unhappy and work performance and productivity are undermined.

"I have seen companies where unresolved issues have lasted for months or years because no one was able to figure out how to deal with them," Grenny says. "How can that be good for a company?"

He points to an evaluation at one hospital where only one in seven workers said they would report a co-worker's action if they thought it might be dangerous. "If I was the CEO of a hospital, I'd be scared to death of that," he says.

Grenny encourages all executives to identify where conflict is unresolved in their workplaces, to provide training for workers that helps them address conflict with candor and respect and to teach other executives in the company how to teach those skills.

"It's something everyone needs and if the executives have to teach it, they have to practice it and it spreads," he said.

He consulted at a large telecom company, whose information technology department suffered 35 percent turnover. Grenny found that problems would go unresolved, and frustrated workers felt leaving the company was their best recourse.

"The problem wasn't that the company had problems but that the workers didn't know how to talk about the problems in a constructive manner," he says. "After they learned some skills in how to have those conversations, the environment quickly changed and the turnover rate dropped to under 15 percent."

Helgeson doesn't understand why all companies don't provide intensive conflict management skills, which she says goes to the heart of employee satisfaction.

"Conflict is not fun for any of us," she says. "But can it be useful? Absolutely. "This goes back to relationships as the core of satisfaction in the workplace. You should want
to do everything you can to improve those."

© Copley News Service