



By Kim Robinson

The SMMarT Guy

Dealing with Conflict



Six frontline employees come into the department manager's office to complain about their supervisor's lack of personal hygiene. "Neal's breath is terrible," complained one. "It's unbearable," said another. "Good God. He gets right in your face when he speaks and it's enough to make you faint," added a third.

"You're his boss. You have to do something!" they collectively whined.

Team morale was sinking fast, and the young manager needed to quickly resolve this conflict and clear the air, if his team was to remain conscious.

The following steps show how the manager could have dealt with this crisis in personal hygiene and workplace conflict. The made-up dialogue may be a bit over the top, but the steps, taken in order, are all that's needed to successfully handle any personal conflict. They work regardless the nature of the conflict, or the relative position of the offending party. It doesn't matter if the conflict is with someone below you on the corporate food chain, above you, or side-by-side. The process to successfully deal with conflict is the same.

1. Bring the offending person into a private setting. Berating others in public is never a good thing. Meet with him behind closed doors and outside the hearing of others. The situation is between you and him and is no one else's business.

2. Be aware of body language—both yours and his—during the entire session. Holding a handkerchief over your nose (in this case) or pointing an accusatory finger tends to escalate, rather than resolve, conflict.

3. State plainly, and in an even tone of voice, what the conflict is as you see it, then tell the person how you feel about the situation and ask him to respond. "Neal, I need to speak with you about your breath. I've received complaints from your co-workers that your breath smells worse than rotten tuna fish and, to be candid, just sitting across the desk from you causes me to agree. Can you shed some light on this situation?"

4. Show respect for the other person's point of view and paraphrase and summarize his words to ensure you've heard clearly. "So, if I hear you correctly, you're aware your breath may have changed for the worse. But, as an avid environmentalist, your concern that the long-term negative impact used toothpaste—spit—may have on the environment led you to quit brushing your teeth some time ago, and that given this big picture of protecting the earth's environment, bad breath is a small price to pay... Is that right?"

5. Gain agreement that a problem exists. "I'm glad you now see that the negative impact your bad breath may have on *your* immediate future at work outweighs any potential long-term negative impact used toothpaste may have on the *environment*...Correct?"

6. Secure a commitment from the employee to change his or her behavior. "OK, so you will immediately begin a vigorous

program of good dental hygiene... Right?"

7. Offer assistance. "Let me know if there is anything I can personally do to help you clean up your breath. Perhaps some coupons for extra-strength toothpaste or industrial strength mouthwash? Some free dental floss perhaps? How about a ride to the dentist?"

8. Agree on an action plan that contains specific dates and milestones for completion. "You will visit the company dentist, Dr. Reams, right away. You will purchase supplies for good dental hygiene after the visit and you will use those supplies to brush and floss your teeth at least twice a day from now on...Correct? Great. Additionally, you will breathe in my face every morning for a month—no, better make that my assistant's face—to ensure you stay on plan. OK?"

9. Follow up and do what you say you'll do.

These simple steps are a guide to resolving virtually any conflict at work. Use them in this order and you'll always be able to comfortably "clear the air." ■

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