



Starting Point

This case concerns a small company which was created in 1774 and is currently managed by the seventh generation of the founder's family.

Daily conflicts, mostly within the production department but also between production and the two owners who manage the firm, started to grow alarmingly. Attempts to resolve them by way of discussions among the individuals involved remained unsuccessful.

All those concerned (i.e. the two owners and the eight production workers) were of the opinion that the working climate was seriously deteriorating. The failure rate in the production department was growing continuously and productivity was decreasing.

The owners came to realize that the survival of the company could even be at stake and that it was critical and urgent to improve the quality of internal collaboration relationships. Upon recommendation, one of them contacted us at the beginning of 2008. We met together and were subsequently asked to make an analysis of the situation, and possibly later on to design and lead a dialog intended to improve the situation.

Our Role

We started with a series of individual discussions with all people involved, with the goal of:

- (a) gaining a first overview of the conflictual issues as a starting point for further discussions;
- (b) determining whether all those involved were willing to try to resolve the conflicts by way of negotiation with the assistance of a neutral third party;
- (c) creating a basis and a structure for a result-oriented conflict management process.
- (d) We hesitated at some point, because one member of the production team (Ms. A.) was obviously viewed by the rest of the team as responsible for the whole misery. This made us think that Ms. A. might be the victim of mobbing – in which case we could not have provided further assistance, considering that mobbing is a problem which can hardly be solved by way of negotiation: in general the victim is not able to negotiate autonomously and participate in a joint conflict management process anymore; in addition, it is doubtful whether the participants on the other side of the table are sincerely willing to negotiate.
- (e) However, everybody (including Ms. A.) appeared to be genuinely willing and able to cooperate. We therefore prepared a "cooperation agreement in a discussion round" which we then all signed together.
- (f) As a next step, we facilitated a half-a-day meeting among the owners and the production workers. This meeting confirmed the willingness of all to actually cooperate in the conflict management effort.

As a matter of fact, a series of specific improvement measures were agreed upon at the end of this meeting. Some of them were to be implemented immediately, others over time. In addition, it was agreed to meet again together a couple of weeks later.

In the interval, it proved necessary to organize a smaller meeting with only four of the production workers. They had indicated that problems were worsening as far as they were concerned and that they needed to talk about it. The climate during this meeting was tense, but at the same time constructive, direct and fair.

In the following days, the situation evolved tumultuously, as Ms. A. suddenly decided to resign.

It took some time for the remaining members of the team to come to terms with this development. At the same time, they did implement the measures which had been agreed upon during the first meeting and were obviously taking them seriously. It therefore made sense to pursue and we then facilitated to second general meeting as planned.

To take stock, we started this second meeting by asking three questions: "What did work well?", "What should not happen anymore?" and "What should be taken into consideration?" The options discussed during the first meeting were then further developed, some new ones were decided and their implementation was outlined. Furthermore, the decision was taken to organize a follow-up meeting one year later, to make sure that the improvement process would not cool off.

Results:

Significant results had already been reached at the end of the first meeting: the problems had been analyzed in details and new rules had been agreed upon in order to improve the quality of internal working relationships. During this meeting, putting the following question to discussion proved very helpful: "Irrespective of whether you will reach an agreement or not, what should in no case happen?" The discussion which this prompted showed everybody that they still had common interests in spite of all their differences.

As indicated by the necessity to convene an intermediate meeting with four preoccupied employees and by the resignation of Ms. A., the implementation of the measures which were agreed upon during the first meeting did not went smoothly, at least at the beginning. At this stage, we again asked ourselves whether Ms. A. was a victim of mobbing. However, she denied it herself in a long conversation which we had with her. As far as the other protagonists were concerned and thanks to their new way of communicating (open and regular feedback) and working together, they were able to solve one difficulty after the other.

In this case, our relationship with the owners of the company was an issue. On the one hand, they were our client; on the other hand, they were themselves involved in the problem which we were helping to resolve, and they had hierarchical authority over the other participants in the process. We therefore insisted right from the beginning on total openness and transparency regarding their own thoughts and goals, and also regarding our role and way of working.

The individuals involved were very satisfied with the conflict management process. They highly appreciated the trustful climate which was established and helped revive their confidence.

This case shows that well structured and totally transparent negotiation management can effectively contribute to the resolution of internal conflicts and to the improvement of working relationships with a company.

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