

Conflict between management and employees

This case is about a large Swiss company which has entrusted a significant part of the delivery of its services to subcontractors. In one of them, the labor relations between management and employees deteriorated considerably. A group of employees turned to a labor union that then alarmed the outsourcing company.

The outsourcing company took the issue seriously and decided to conduct an audit of this subcontractor. It had the resources in-house to carry out the audit, but in order to ensure the impartiality of the process, it asked us to manage it. We had certainly never taken on such a task; however, our attitude as principled negotiators allowed us to do so successfully.

Among other things, the audit found that the DG on the one hand and the employees on the other side perceived the situation in a completely different way! We then proposed to the subcontractor to start a project called « Convergence » whose objective was to bridge the gap between the respective perceptions. We made this proposal in collaboration with the Human Resource department of the outsourcing company; it delegated to this end one of the persons who had already participated in the audit. The project took place in three phases:

- a) The CEO first invited the employees to a meeting. During this session, we presented the project and he presented the subcontractor's strategy (of which the employees were virtually unaware).
- b) We then organized a first workshop. During this workshop, the management team and the employees worked in two different rooms and addressed two questions ("What works well?" and "What bothers us?") and noted their findings on Post-it notes. The management team and the employees then read their respective their respective findings, without discussing them.
- c) A week later, we organized a second workshop. This time it was for the members of the management team and the employees to reflect *together* in a structured way on the main themes that had emerged from the previous workshop and to formulate proposals for improvement. More than 50 ideas have been expressed!

Following these three phases, the management team selected a first group of ideas and initiated their implementation jointly with the employees.

We were impressed by the fact that the number of employees who participated in the project has increased steadily. While no more than 15 people attended the first meeting, more than half of the employees participated in the second workshop.

When we took stock with the management team nine months later, the results were highly positive. All the measures based on the main ideas selected after the workshops had been implemented. The quality of communication and collaboration had markedly increased – especially at the largest site.

One of the problems that had created the most resentment among employees could be resolved in a remarkably creative and intelligent way.

Employees had already stated during the audit that they did not understand the reasons why the larger company was working with sub-contractors. A meeting with was therefore organized during which one of the managers of this this company came to explain the rationale of this strategy. His intervention was highly appreciated.

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