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Conflicts in teams:
pure stress factor or the
beginning of a productive
cooperation?



**Talking to parents
about getting
older** – these tips
could help



Over the last few weeks, we employed an intern at our institute. A young man who fled from Syria two years ago together with his wife and two children. His whole manner moved many of us here. He was deeply grateful to us for all the small things of our daily working life. He was very happy whenever he was given a new job to do and took delight in every conversation, in being invited to meetings and finally being able to actively participate in German, as well as in the piece of cake when we celebrated a birthday in the company. Most of us take all these things for granted. I sometimes wonder if we don't deny ourselves some pleasure in life by overlooking the smaller things. Do we tend to focus too much on things that don't or no longer work – such as with the issues of conflicts in the workplace and having parents in need of help?

Even with the topics from our newsletter, we could try to see the more positive aspects of these challenges. I wish you a wonderful summer and hope you enjoy all the little things that make life worth living.

Best regards,

Reinhild Fürstenberg

Conflicts in teams:

pure stress factor or the beginning of a productive cooperation?

Let's begin by stating the most important point: conflict is inevitable in workplace settings! Conflicts in teams are frequently thought of as negative. This serves to impede cooperation, while productivity worsens and workers become less satisfied and begin to fear for their jobs. It's also possible that increased stress leads to higher levels of illness. What's more, conflicts are often regarded as a waste of time and other resources.

On the other hand, conflicts also fulfil key functions when people work together. Many cases have shown how teams become more successful as a result of their ability to deal with conflicts constructively. In particular, conflicts can have a positive function when they serve to clarify roles, responsibilities and interpersonal relations in the team. This helps to create a more personable working atmosphere, which is of great importance with regard to the degree of satisfaction at work.

Strengthened mutual trust and the new possibility of an open communication after successfully resolving a conflict often lead to increased creativity from the team.

In many cases, solving a particular conflict means simultaneously removing entrenched structures which, in turn, sparks a greater willingness to innovate among teams and among individual employees.



A closer look at conflict management

When there is a conflict in the team and if various negative consequences that damage the overall performance are already visible, it is time to take action. But are team conflicts a matter for the boss or are the team members themselves responsible for coming up with the solution? Is an external moderator or mediator required? And when is the best time to react to the conflict?

Regarding the last question, it might be useful to consider an analogy of a conflict involving a fish:

Where does a freshly caught fish belong? Exactly – on the table! Even if the necessary work to get there isn't particularly pleasant, one simply has to separate the edible parts from the inedible ones

in order to turn the fish into a tasty meal. Of course, it's also possible to let the fish slip under the table and avoid having to get your hands dirty. At the beginning, it's still possible to overcome the odious smells by allowing plenty of fresh air into the room. However, the time will soon come when you can simply no longer work in the room because of the stink. Finally, you have to do something about the fish. There's nothing edible or enjoyable about it anymore. All you can do is get rid of the damage.

When applied to conflict management, this story means that taking action at an early stage will considerably benefit and simplify the process of finding a solution to the conflict. In the early phase of a conflict, it is often still possible for team members to work together – sometimes with the support of management – to find a viable solution. The pre-condition for this is open communication, characterized by mutual respect and acceptance. It is often enough to establish the right degree of understanding and clarity regarding the nature of the conflict. This clarity may relate to the assignment of tasks in the team, the objectives and the best way to achieve them, as well as the role allocations and responsibilities. Once the conflict has been cleared up, the team can get to work on adopting the agreed measures and checking to see if they will work over the long term.

If feuding "camps" have already formed within a team, however, or if certain actions have taken place that aimed to damage integrity, it is essential to recruit a conflict moderator or mediator. It is also conceivable for the boss to perform this role provided he/she has the necessary skills.



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Principles of conflict solution – in short

1. Differentiate between people and problems!
2. Different opinions and behaviours are normal.
3. Respect and tolerance when dealing with others are essential for solving conflicts.
4. Focus on common interests, not on opposing positions!
5. There are often different possibilities for action that can be included in the solution.
6. Only pursue objectives that are good both for you and for the other side.
7. Power means achieving your objectives, not punishing others.
8. Observe the unity of the means and the end – don't use a sledgehammer to crack a nut.



Organizing break times in the digital age

Germany's Initiative for Health and Work (iga) carried out a survey on the way German employees organized their breaks. The results found that large numbers of German employees have an unhealthy break culture. Either they skip their breaks entirely, attend to their private matters, use breaks exclusively to eat something or spend the time on their smartphones. Young people, in particular, claimed to spend their breaks communicating with friends online, checking out their social networks or reading/writing private e-mails. Many of the older people surveyed use their smartphones as little as possible during their breaks as they don't find this relaxing. According to the iga study, the most restful activity for break times is taking a walk in the fresh air.



To help you make your break times more relaxing, we have come up with 3 tips:

1. At least once a week, spend your break without your smartphone.
2. Be more active! If the weather is good, go out for a walk. But even if the weather is bad you could relax your muscles and reduce stress by doing some movement and breathing exercises.
3. Arrange to meet colleagues for lunch and make an effort not to talk exclusively about work.

You can read the full iga report (in German) here:

www.iga-info.de/veroeffentlichungen/igareporte/igareport-34/



Talking to parents about getting older

– these tips could help



In most cases, the signs creep up on us slowly. Father increasingly forgets important things yet he still insists on driving his car, even though his eyesight is faltering. Mother has now left

the oven on for the fourth time, which never happened in the past. Just recently, she had serious problems finding her way back to the house by herself.

The onset of dementia, physical infirmity and declining mental fitness cause children to worry whether their parents are still really able to live independently. Should their home be made more equipped for disabilities? Would it be a good idea to move into a home for the elderly? Does it make sense to employ a home help? What do the parents think about living in a care home? The questions are never-ending.

The biggest problem is often raising the subject in the first place. Many children fear the issue being rejected by their parents (“You think I’m starting to lose my mind”) or that they will be met with an angry response (“You can’t wait to get your hands on the inheritance”). This makes it even more important to think things through before raising the subject. These tips could help.

These tips could help

Choose the right moment

Many children who live away from their parents mainly only return home for holidays or special occasions. Having a conversation about the onset of dementia between opening up Christmas presents and tucking into the turkey is not a very good idea. On the other hand, this leads to the conversation being postponed yet again. The situation will then only get even more difficult if the care issue suddenly becomes acute because mother or father can no longer live alone for safety reasons. However, there is no sense in rushing into the conversation (“We have to talk right now”). It would be better to raise the subject during a walk and one way to start could be to wonder out loud about your own life in later years.

Analysis of the current situation

It is a truism that cannot be stated often enough: before talking about the choice of a potential care home, the current situation has to be analyzed precisely.

These are the key points:

What is the father’s/mother’s physical and mental condition? Can he/she still wash/shower/dress alone, keep the home in order, do the shopping, drive the car, take care of their finances? How good is their mobility/hearing/sight/memory?

What is their social situation like? Do they still have close contact to their neighbours and friends? Do they still have hobbies? Are they interested in taking part in afternoons for senior citizens?

What is their housing situation like? Could their home be made more equipped for disabilities? Is it possible to install disabled-friendly sanitary facilities? Would it make sense to fit a stair lift?

What is the financial situation like? How much do their regular incomes amount to? What would their home be worth if they sold it? Are there sufficient reserves to be able to organize 24-hour care at home over the coming years?



Unity among siblings

The image of a happy family often contains several cracks. Some siblings may not have been in touch with each other for several years. But for the sake of their parents, they now wish to pull together and agree in advance on the best path to take and on who should talk to their parents. Nothing is worse for parents than to see their children argue over this matter.

There are no fixed rules

There are pros and cons for all possible housing situations – from staying in one's own home with help from a care service, to moving into

a retirement home or care home. Another possibility is for parents to move closer to their children or even into their homes. Or if there is enough space in the parent's house, one of the children could move with their own family back into the family home. There are no fixed rules, but one thing should be taken into consideration: the solution must be stable and, if possible, be able to last for years. For this reason, one should not rush into anything, but would be well advised to carefully consider whether a marriage or family could tolerate living with one's parents. What would happen if the grandchildren suddenly saw their grandparents every day instead of once a month? How would one's partner deal with interference from their in-laws? For these cases, we recommend recognizing and respecting one's own limits.

Put yourself in your parents' situation

Imagine someone coming to visit you and saying, "Your house is much too big, you don't need so much space. All that porcelain in the cupboards never sees the light of day anyway. One or two rooms should really be enough at your age." Raising the topic of aging by saying, "I know what's best for you at your age", will undoubtedly lead to serious conflicts. Instead, it would be more helpful to maintain the parents' autonomy, and respect their wishes and decisions.

Don't kid yourself

Children often make the mistake of kidding themselves when it comes to their parents' physical and mental deficiencies so that the problems do not seem too serious. However, this is no good to anyone – least of all to the parents. All members of the family have to understand that the current problems are hardly likely to improve. In most cases, the health of the parent in question is more likely to deteriorate. It makes no sense, therefore, only to talk about the current situation, as the future also has to be considered – particularly with the onset of

dementia. It would help to empathize with the pain that the elderly person feels at losing certain abilities, and let them know that you see their fears and pain, and are willing to help wherever needed.

But don't dramatize either

But don't dramatize either

Whoever starts a conversation with the topic of death should not be surprised if their parents block them. Awakening fears helps no-one. First look for a low-threshold solution. For example, begin by discussing help at home instead of immediately raising the subject of moving into a care home.



Don't begin with ready-made solutions

A conversation with parents about getting older is not like giving a PowerPoint presentation during a meeting at work. If you start out by insisting that your parents hand over their driving licenses ("Driving is too dangerous for you now and the bus stop isn't far away anyway"), runs the risk of their mother or father putting a stop to the conversation. Try a more gentle approach along the lines of, "I know how much the car means to you. I would also find it really difficult to get by without it."

Don't feel insulted by responses

These conversations can be painful – also for children. Being told, "You want to make my decisions for me just so you can get at my money", can be very hurtful. But don't forget that your parents don't mean what they say at such moments. For them, the thought of losing control of their own lives is awful. Responding with aggression in this phase ("So that's how you thank me for taking care of you") risks putting an end to the whole discussion.

The difficult role reversal

For decades, we were always the children. Our parents raised us and supported us. In many cases, they also funded our education. Now the relationship has turned on its head. We children want to take care of our parents. This role reversal can be highly complicated. A touch of humour can be helpful here, combined with a healthy dose of respect: "Do you remember how you always used to tell me to come home on time. And how often did I stay in the disco for way too long? But you were always there for me and I'm not going to desert you now."

Don't settle old scores

Crisis situations often lead to old conflicts opening up again. This is as true of real life as it is of politics. Feelings of distress may be involved here, perhaps because your parents never really accepted your choice of partner. It really helps no-one to reignite such old conflicts after several decades ("You were pig-headed in those days too when I wanted to fulfil my dream of becoming a pilot"). Seek out reconciliation – anything is better than fretting when a conversation is no longer possible.



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