



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT,
A few months ago, I had a conflict with a coworker in which we both behaved immaturely.

My supervisor overheard my conversation with my coworker and immediately sided with her. Without notifying me, she then changed my responsibilities so that I no longer supervised this coworker.

I then approached my supervisor. She and her supervisor said that my behavior was unacceptable and that they were trying to avoid conflict. They also noted that my coworker is African American. But my argument with my coworker was not about racial issues. I was offended, but I also acknowledge that I was immature in handling the disagreement. I apologized to the coworker as well.

Now, in the context of my performance appraisal, my supervisor has decided to re-open the issue. I believe she made the issue larger than it was because she never approached me about it. She assumed I was the bad guy without hearing my side. And I don't think my boss realizes that I am also a part of the minority community; I am Hispanic. And besides, race had nothing to do with it.

I want to write a rebuttal because I

believe I am being mistreated and that my reputation is now at stake over an issue that was mishandled by those at the top to begin with.

I don't deserve a bad appraisal.

Don't Deserve It

Dear Don't Deserve It,
When Dr. Conflict first read your letter, he applauded you for taking responsibility for being immature with your coworker. Instead of your receiving a bad appraisal, he thought you should be commended for owning up to your mistake. Ditto for your apology to your coworker.

But then Dr. Conflict reread your letter and became confused. First, you use the term coworker to describe the other party but then note that this person was removed from your supervisory responsibilities. How can someone be a coworker and a subordinate? The term coworker means that you're on the same level, that you are peers, colleagues.

Second, you say initially that both of you were at fault but then back away from the statement with a conspicuous "maybe I was immature." By the time you reach the end of your letter,

the conflict isn't your problem at all, but rather something "mishandled by those at the top."

Third, you complain about being left out of the loop about the change in your responsibilities.

Fourth, you say that your supervisors noted that your former direct report is African American, but you say that there are no racial issues at play. There's something missing here that Dr. Conflict can't quite figure out. At the very least, there's an undercurrent of some sort; at the very worst, there are real issues that need to be addressed.

After putting on his CSI hat, here's what Dr. Conflict thinks really happened: First, you were the supervisor and she was your direct report. Calling her a coworker is a nice way to say that she works on the team, but that doesn't mean she is your peer.¹

Second, you lost your cool as a supervisor and you're minimizing your accountability by ignoring the fact that she worked for you. You can't be a coworker when it suits you and a boss when it doesn't.² Even though you both may have behaved badly, you had the power as the supervisor to change the

tone of the confrontation. You cannot act out with your direct reports just because they act out with you. That's why you're paid the big bucks; you're a supervisor because you're supposed to be wiser and more experienced. In a phrase, your job is to stifle yourself. You represent the organization and your behavior vis-à-vis direct reports can have major consequences (e.g., can you spell lawsuit?).

Third, Dr. Conflict thinks you were left out of the loop because the conflict that your supervisor overheard was much worse than you describe. It was so bad that she took the step of involving her supervisor, and they demoted you without your input. And fourth, this suggests that the racial issues you have dismissed may be more significant than you think.

Dr. Conflict thinks his take is more likely than yours for two reasons. The first is because of Occam's razor, which says that the simplest explanation is likely the right one. In other words, for your explanation to be correct, your boss, her boss, and your former direct report would have to be wrongheaded, and as they say in Kentucky, that dog won't hunt. Second, it's human nature to paint things—especially ourselves—in the most positive light, a phenomenon called the “above-average effect,” or, more affectionately, the Lake Woebegon effect where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.”

If Dr. Conflict is right about what really happened, it's a sure bet that the issue will appear on your performance appraisal. So what should you do now? What about that rebuttal of yours? Dr. Conflict's advice is that such a rejoinder will surely be ill taken and may hasten your departure from the organization. You're in real trouble. You may not know it, but your supervisors do. And when they removed your direct report

from your supervision, they took strong action to prove it.

The first thing to do is acknowledge your error with a heartfelt apology. Not only should you do so with your former direct report but also with your supervisor and her supervisor. No ifs, ands, or buts concerning why it happened. If expressed with sincerity of purpose, apologies can be powerful. In mediation, Dr. Conflict prays that one or both parties will apologize—even for a small thing. An apology—which often takes the form of recognizing the pain of the other party—is often the turning point from negative and destructive to positive and constructive. In other words, apologies begin the healing process in conflict.

When you apologize, you become more open and transparent as well as someone to whom others can relate. Everyone is human; we all make mistakes. Apologies engender reciprocal behavior and almost always help move everyone forward toward solutions.

The second thing to do is present a plan on how to fix the conflict. You can propose that you take a workshop in people skills or a course on emotional intelligence in the workplace; that you get an executive coach; or that you undergo a 360-degree assessment to gain insight on how others see you. Your organization may or may not help with the costs. But either way, your issue needs attention and will plague your career unless you take action. If there's one thing human-service professionals know about, it's relapse. And without concrete action, you're sure to do just that.

Third, use a trick that Dr. Conflict has learned to keep his head on straight in a storm of emotions: fold your hands in front of you and link your fingers. See how it immediately calms you and allows you to breathe easier.

Moreover, you get a near-instant feel for your anxiety level by noticing your knuckle tension. And best of all, if your hands are folded calmly, it's harder to strangle someone.

As you go forward, just remember two things: First, eating warm crow is easier than eating it cold; don't wait for the performance appraisal to step forward with your apology. And second, remember not to mess it up by making excuses; you did what you did, you own it, and you're going to fix it. Boldly apologize, be spot on with your plan of action, keep those hands folded, and you just might keep your job and turn this thing around.

ENDNOTES

1. Dr. Conflict is a member of his family of five, but he is not one of the three children (although his wife may disagree). In fact, Dr. Conflict is proud to be the master of his castle right up to the moment his wife gets home.
2. Dr. Conflict often behaves like a child with his children, but as his wife reminds him, he's an adult and this requires a higher standard of accountability.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light teaches at the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict at the Dayton Media Center, where he is a mediator.

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