Teaching Workers to Play in the Sandbox Together

We all know that the workplace can be very stressful. Working with people who have different personalities and work ethics can lead to some major issues which must be faced. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the workplace is the most dangerous place to be in America. The problem is so pervasive that the Centers For Disease Control have classified workplace violence as a National Epidemic. To spare you the other morbid statistics I found, lets just say that physical and verbal violence workplace is rapidly growing.

From a very young age, we teach our children how to play nicely with others. From the first time Billy takes Tommy's shovel in the sandbox, we begin training our kids how to handle and react when something doesn't go our way. Why should the workplace be any different?

Most often, conflict comes about when people have different opinions, life experiences, and goals. While there are times when you should be assertive and express your opinion, that does not give you the excuse to be a jerk. You can boldly do what is needed with tact and respect without attacking or bulldozing others. There are six main reasons for employee conflict.

Differences in age
Age differences can cause a lack of respect. Older employees may feel that the younger generation has a low work ethic. The younger employees may feel that the older generation is too set in their ways and unwilling to change. While both arguments may have validity in some instances, they are not general rules. Regardless of age, you should respect those with whom you work.

Differences in philosophy
Add up the number of people in your department, and you'll find just about that many ideas on how things should be run. When it's all said and done, the boss makes the final decision, and everyone else must go along with it.

Lack of communication
Some people are better communicators that others. Some are very good at distributing information to all involved parties, while others aren't. When information doesn't get passed down in a timely manner, deadlines may be missed or, at the very least, added stress and a few late nights may be needed in order to keep everything on track. When people are stressed, tempers seems to flare quicker and over smaller issues.

> *We can often do more for the other men by trying to correct our own faults than by trying to correct theirs.*
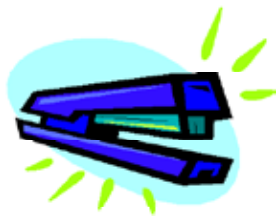> *Francois Fenelon (1651-1715)*
> *Theologian*

Diversity issues that are not solved

There are times that a situation arises, but it is never properly resolved. Sometimes the "agree to disagree" approach doesn't pan out so well. If disagreements are never laid to rest, they will fester inside people. If a resolution isn't reached, the next clash will be even worse than the first.

Focusing on the minors rather than majors

There are some issues that just aren't worth the fight. Like with your kids, must learn to pick your battles. At my home, my 4-year-old son has started picking out his own clothes. Most days he does pretty well, but there are times when I look at what he has on and cringe because it doesn't match. The first several times it happened, I'd make him change clothes and he'd throw a fit, which would lead to a fight because he wasn't obeying. Then I realized that it really didn't matter. Co-workers are the same way. Does it really matter what color the presentation folder is going to be, if someone borrowed your stapler without asking, or if someone parked in your favorite parking spot? Ask yourself if whatever has upset you is important enough to turn into an issue.

No relationship with employees

There are some managers who don't feel the need to have a relationship with their employees. They have the king/servant mentality. They're the boss and don't interact with anyone else unless they need something or if there's a problem. A better way is to have an open relationship. If your employees feel like they can trust you and their opinions will be heard, they'll be more likely to follow your lead and not grumble.

When it does come time to speak to people about a situation, you must know how to approach them.

- Have mental game plan
- Focus on the problem
- Describe your observations and the impact
- Seek information
- Reflect feelings
- State your needs
- Offer to help
- Agree on the steps each of you will take

Issues are going to come up. After deciding whether it's worth the time and energy of a confrontation, knowing how to tactfully and respectfully address the problem will lead to healthy relationships and a better working environment.