

the **HRDIRECTOR**

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the **HRDIRECTOR INTERVIEW:** **BEHIND THE ALLOY CURTAIN**

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ABSENTEEISM

New ways of tackling HR's old enemy

CSR

Business has to be part of a sustainable future... or else

CORPORATE TRANSFORMATION

Managing change and keeping the faith

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Harvesting the negative, accentuating the positive

CASE STUDIES & FEATURES

Berkshire Consultancy

Cable & Wireless

CMI

Hewitt

KRONOS

P&MM

Penna

Remploy

SFL

The Prince's Trust

**Pictured: Victoria Petrova
HR director, UC Rusal**

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DON'T MISS NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE WHERE WE LOOK AT: EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT - OPTIMISING PRODUCTIVITY. CHANGING SHAPE OF THE WORKFORCE - KEEPING PACE WITH CHANGE. SMOKE-FREE WORKPLACE - POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE? PENSIONS CRISIS - IT ISN'T GOING AWAY ...AND MORE

Understanding Conflict Culture...



BUSINESS LEADERS TEND TO HOPE THAT THEY CAN SWEEP THEIR INTERNAL RIFTS AND FEUDS UNDER THE CARPET. AS CONFLICT EXPERT, PROF. CHARLIE IRVINE, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF QUESTIONS OF DIFFERENCE ALWAYS ADVISES, YOU DO THIS AT YOUR PERIL.

If someone asked you what your company's conflict culture was you might reply that you hoped it didn't have one. After all, you don't go to work to have arguments. If they asked instead what your company's reward structure was you'd probably be able to say straight away. There are aspects of human behaviour, which are welcomed into the work place and motivation by reward is one of them. Human difference and the conflict this can lead to are just as natural, but not something usually recognised as valuable. Questions of Difference takes the view that human differences actually represent an enormous resource of creativity that can drive continuous improvement and innovation. If organisations can embrace conflict as a resource they can look forward to really tapping into their human potential.

“humans evolved an avoidance strategy, which involved running away or smoothing over differences”

So what is it about conflict that makes people wary of it? In evolutionary terms conflict carries costs; from physical injury to loss of status. So humans evolved an avoidance strategy, which involved running away or smoothing over differences. In modern organisations good manners dictate that “open” conflict is avoided and everyone maintains their cool. The problem with this approach is that the conflict has not disappeared; it's simply being suppressed for fear of the potential consequences. Paradoxically, this costs an organisation dearly in lost productivity, creativity and collaboration as conflict is expressed instead through de-motivation, absenteeism or the undermining of priorities. In the work we do, they find that most organisations struggle to tap into the differences underlying conflict. As they describe in “*Cash in on Conflict*”, accepting that conflict is natural, and it is how organisations manage it that counts, is the necessary first step.

An organisation we worked with in the financial sector had two departments who consistently under delivered. Targets were missed and blame was plentiful. The whole issue was being laid at the door of two very strong characters. By the time the organisation came to us they had “*tried everything*”, including a team building exercise involving the “*dispute resolution through copious amounts of alcohol*” approach, which they were still trying to recover from.

“people devote time and energy to things they feel passionate about, and one thing that arouses passion is unexpressed difference”

Using a process based on Dana's escalating conflict model, the teams were helped to identify their issues. Suddenly as one of the team excused himself to go to the toilet, one of the quieter members of the team blurted out, “*That is just so typical of you Steve. You stand in the background critiquing everything we are trying to do, but when it comes to taking action you leave*”. This outburst startled most people, including the speaker, and immediately allowed the floodgates to open. For several hours the

team talked through a range of issues. The two personalities were definitely a factor, and other things emerged, including an antiquated process that was driving continued conflict within and between the teams.

The company knows they cannot always rely on calls of nature to help the issues surface. But by giving people an appropriate process to unpack and explore conflict, they see teams surprise themselves by rapidly resolving issues that have plagued them for years.

The Conflict Cost Calculator

People devote time and energy to things they feel passionate about, and one thing that arouses passion is unexpressed difference. When organisations contain thousands of unexpressed differences how much time is lost as people ruminate over other people's ways of working and develop complex processes to avoid the elephant in the room? We developed a formula to calculate the cost of conflict: This is only one aspect of how to calculate the cost of conflict. What else could be causing your organisation to haemorrhage resources?

Conclusion - What could be different?

There are many aspects to developing profitable conflict cultures within organisations. The starting point is individuals themselves. Inviting people to complete a conflict reflection sheet is a useful way for them to consider their relationship with conflict and how this impacts on their work. During a leadership programme run by us, one manager talked about her realisation that vigorous debate, and firing questions, was her instinctive route to a great discussion. Another colleague commented that this made sense, as others could perceive her “*great debate*” as aggressive or even bullying. Both of them recognised this was not her intended communication style, and they took away tangible actions as a result.

As you begin to understand your own relationship with conflict there are two questions for you to think about: What is one dispute or difference that, when finally resolved, would make the biggest difference to you? What will be different when you Cash in on Conflict in your organisation?



Prof. Charlie Irvine
Managing Director
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QUESTIONS
OF
DIFFERENCE