PART ONE

WHAT IS THE WORKING CIRCLE?

Chapter 1

The Power of the Circle in Conflict Resolution

I work with organizations of every kind and size and I never cease to be amazed at how rarely companies offer emotionally intelligent processes for resolving conflicts. Think about it: Have you ever, when you started a new job, attended a seminar that explains "how we resolve conflicts here"? I'd be surprised if your answer were yes. Most of the time employees are told by management, "We are a team here!" For some reason, companies seem to expect their employees to come to the job knowing instinctively which steps to take to address challenges they face on the job. If there is training on this important topic, it tends to be idealized, and fails to make a direct connection to the actual culture of the organization.

Why People Have Problems Resolving Conflicts

In my experience, very few organizations can articulate the most effective (and *realistic*) approach to problem solving and conflict resolution, even though employees are called upon to use this skill every single day. If a manager does say, "Okay folks, we've got to stop the bickering, and get along here," there's rarely even a hint as to how to stop the bickering, beyond the nondescript "behave and get along" type of instruction. If an attempt is made to get to the cause of the conflict, it usually results in assigning blame. Once there is an assignment of blame, opposing sides resort to blame avoidance and reluctance or refusal to take responsibility. I call this the

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"no-stick" approach to work—the effort to bounce blame off of oneself and attach it to someone else. How often do you read e-mails or sit at meetings in which people use techniques to avoid blame or responsibility for some blowup or failure? Worse yet, how often does someone attempt to lay blame or assign negative responsibility directly on your shoulders?

Everyone expects the other person to learn how to behave, because no one feels safe enough to assume responsibility. We end up feeling victimized at work, and thus have a hard time seeing our own behavior in any sort of objective light. Responsibility comes to mean not courage and ownership, but blame. Under these circumstances, we have a hard time trusting the people we work with. At the end of the workday, we are exhausted, and the exhaustion isn't from our work, but from dodging bullets. This typically happens to a greater or lesser degree, but at whatever level it does occur, we start to expect that this is what work is about. That brings disengagement, and, over time, both the professional loses and the organization loses.

When destructive conflict occurs, the informal network works overtime, with more gossip ensuing, thereby deepening the polarization. In more extreme cases, disputants can undermine each other's efforts. And if the position of leadership is to assume that everyone will get along better in the future, or that this is just what happens at work, it's not surprising that everyone comes to expect that what happened in the past will continue in the present, that this is the status quo.

Consequently, when it comes to resolving long-standing conflicts at work, most people rely on their personal styles for doing so, which they probably developed when they were kids. Coping styles learned in childhood are generally not flexible, and rarely are useful in the workplace! Professionals who have had training in conflict management skills commonly have

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been taught to focus on a linear, combative model to support their efforts. The training, moreover, usually is idealized, and fails to use as examples real situations about real people, which could help them when they are in the trenches. To date, no organization I have been called in to work with was factoring the company culture into the teaching of conflict resolution skills. For example, some cultures are more aggressive than others; working at them *requires* assertive management skills. In more nonconfrontational cultures, by contrast, employees need to use indirect language. Thus, the training I provide for, say, construction workers, must be different from the training I offer to social workers. The concepts are the same, but the situational language used has to shift.

Conflict and Culture

Conflict and culture are very closely related. Figuring out the culture where you work is, for most people, an intuitive activity, and not so much a conscious one. In my case, however, I enjoy observing human behavior, and have been studying organizational cultures for a very long time, in a very conscious manner. For example, when I began working at Chase, I immediately noted how everyone dressed; it quickly became clear to me that the bank had an unwritten dress code. I would sit at meetings and look at everyone's shoes. Most of the men (this was in the 1980s) wore wingtip shoes, with tassels. And in those days the men all wore suits. When a man was in his office, he would take his suit jacket off, and hang it up. If he had to leave his office (sometimes just to go to the men's room), he would put the jacket on. Within two months of being hired, all male employees had adopted the dress code, and the custom, sometimes without conscious thought. Culture imposes conformity and uniformity to rules—many of them unspoken.

Let me give you another example of corporate culture, from a large engineering firm. All the male employees at this firm wore slacks and shirts with collars. Further, what I noticed as I began to visit on a regular basis, was that they wore just two shirt colors: blue (many shades) and white. When men came to work there, they learned on a subliminal level which colors were acceptable to wear. Therefore, in a short period of time, no colors other than blue and white were being worn.

What Unspoken Rules Exist in Your Workplace?   Connecting culture to conflict requires taking a leap, but one that is important to make, if you want to succeed at your company. Here's an example of that connection I witnessed at a large law firm, where it was accepted (and almost expected) that once an attorney made partner, he or she was free to make accusations, shout, and have angry fits. And if the partner was an impressive revenue generator, he or she had even greater license to behave badly. Prior to becoming a partner, it was totally not acceptable to demonstrate such behavior. What message did that send? To aspiring attorneys, the freedom to act poorly was seen as a reward.

Conversely, for the nonattorney staff, there was a persistent belief that being the poorly treated underclass was a condition of employment.

As a result of this kind of culture, conflict resolution becomes unbalanced: it functions entirely under the male model. It always makes me smile to think that attorneys are trained to be adversarial, and that this is also how they generally manage and behave. Of course, I have met some attorneys who are outstanding managers, but law firms normally support cultures that feed on destructive conflict.

Another example indicative of the connection between conflict and culture comes from a large national nonprofit,

where conflict is viewed as something to avoid. People there smile a lot, gossip a lot, avoid direct conversation a lot. If there is a conflict that won't go away (which happens frequently), the disputants are treated more in a therapeutic manner. Tiptoeing around the source of the conflict is the norm, as is discussing the conflict with one's allies around the coffee machine. When I have asked disputants about their adversaries, I generally get a response like, "I really like her; I think we can get along. I don't really know what the problem is. Can we talk about something else now?" This is a classic illustration of the feminine model of avoidance, which over time sucks the energy right out of an organization.

No leader in any organization would openly admit that conflict is encouraged, and that collaboration is discouraged. Unwittingly, however, cultures develop that do exactly that, and then the reward systems emerge that maintain the status quo. The point is, leaders need to be equally comfortable sustaining constructive conflict and collaboration.

I have worked with many professionals involved in messy conflicts, who want to resolve them professionally, and effectively—such as protesting an action of a manager, requesting more teamwork, or asking for a more balanced workload. But for most individuals, the simple act of facing management usually leaves them feeling nervous, insecure, and unclear as to what to say and how to best approach the more senior staff member.

As I've said before, most corporations are run in a very male-oriented manner. Demonstrating dominance, denying mistakes, taking no prisoners, being solution focused, and so on, are all common behaviors I see in most businesses. These are not negative qualities; on the contrary, most of them are necessities for success. But there are subtleties involved.

In a competitive world, one needs to demonstrate dominance, yes, but always having to do this implies always having to be on top, always having to prevail. That is impossible. What does a company do when it is not victorious? It needs to rely on feminine qualities, like adapting and admitting to mistakes. Organizations that just keep charging forward inevitably exhaust their employees; they don't use reflection as a learning tool, and thus foster combative cultures. Everything becomes colored by the "I'm right, you're wrong" attitude. (Does that sound like the way our government is run, too?)

Companies that invoke feminine traits such as process orientation, mutual support, admission of mistakes, and submission are in the minority. That said, these behaviors are not necessarily positive, either, all the time or in every circumstance. As I noted in the Introduction, neither set of behaviors in and of itself is negative; it is the imbalance that is negative. It is the degree to which any organization relies on either masculine or feminine behaviors that puts it in balance or out.

One surefire way to determine where your organization is on the masculine/feminine continuum is to examine the jokes that travel around the office. Joking that is aggressive, that revolves around insiders and outsiders that makes some people uncomfortable, usually reflects a more masculine culture. I was at breakfast at a conference held by a large national organization where there was entertainment—or what some people thought was entertainment. The comedian went on for about 10 minutes telling jokes and making comments about how dumb people from Oklahoma were. I did not find him funny at all, but I couldn't help but see that the humor reflected the culture of the organization—elitist, opinionated, and separatist. And, as exemplified by the aggressive manner of the comedian, it was certainly masculine.

Let me sum up this section by sharing with you an interesting and amusing comparison that was making the rounds a while ago about three different companies on Wall Street, specifically about how each of them operated. (For obvious reasons, I won't reveal their names):

Company #1: "Ready, fire, aim!" (The masculine model)

Company #2: "Ready, ready, ready!" (The feminine model)

Company #3: "Ready, aim, ready, fire!" (The balanced model)

Which One Is Your Organization? As I write these thoughts, I am faced with a dilemma: as a woman, how do I present these ideas without appearing to condemn masculine traits? In order to be as successful as I have, I have had to develop many masculine qualities. On the other hand, I never was, or even wanted to be, so masculine in my behavior that I forgot to be feminine, to exhibit compassion and be willing to admit my mistakes, even to my adversaries.

This is the balance I've been talking about, which organizations need. It doesn't matter what the establishment is about, whether it is a corporation, the government, a nonprofit, or a small entrepreneurial venture. It could be your supermarket, your city government, your church, or the nonprofit you donate to. When there is balance between masculine and feminine attributes in an organization, that organization will compete, thrive, display compassion, be creative, be nimble, be able to resolve conflicts with accountability, and thus be a great place to work.

The Working Circle is a balanced approach, opening up both masculine *and* feminine perspectives, so that solutions

to problems and conflicts are far more comprehensive and longer lasting.

As I've said before, usually we think of conflict resolution as a linear process—there's a beginning and an ending—and organizations and individuals tend to favor this viewpoint, as limited as it is. Because it is limited, there are definite disadvantages to using it. For one, a linear approach erroneously assumes you'll find a solution by following a straight line of thinking. However, when you confine yourself within the limits of linear thinking, you're less likely to think outside the box (solve problems creatively).

When creativity is encouraged, people tend to be more courageous in generating ideas; they are more collaborative, too, even in the midst of conflict. Recall from the Introduction that I said decision making is the foundation of resolving any conflict. The decision-making process, at its best, is creative and nonlinear. In fact, there is no beginning or ending to decision making, for once we make a decision there are consequences. Those consequences then lead to the need to make more decisions, and on and so on. You get the idea.

In contrast to the beginning-and-ending process, a nonlinear approach allows us to meander around ideas, explore more options, and become more creative with our solutions. A nonlinear approach also lets us explore using our intuition, taking into account our emotions, hunches, and gut feels; these represent the feminine side of the decision-making process. We are all familiar with using the masculine, straight-to-the-finish way of making decisions. I'm suggesting that by combining the linear with the more intuitive (circular) approach, we can all become extraordinary decision makers. This is true whether you are a man or a woman. When making decisions, we need all the tools (feminine and masculine) available to us—especially at work, where competitive pressures abound.

As we progress as professionals and face the many cross-roads that appear throughout our careers, we need a conflict resolution process that will serve us at every fork in the road. And that's the beauty of The Working Circle—it delivers!

One of the primary reasons The Working Circle is so effective is that it factors in intuition as a vital component in decision making. Despite proclamations made by some business gurus that intuition is alive and functioning well in organizations, in practice most companies fail to support its use in the conference and boardrooms, preferring the tried, but not so true, linear approach.

Understandably, the masculine, linear decision-making model fits comfortably within the traditional male-dominated business structure. The gender imbalance naturally fostered an out-of-balance decision-making process. But one of the consequences of that continuing imbalance is the loss of maximum creativity, which can put companies at a serious disadvantage; simply put, creative organizations are known to develop competitive advantages. Sad to say, however, in the last 20 years, even as women have been steadily rising in the corporate ranks, the balance has not yet shifted dramatically: the masculine decision-making model still prevails. Why? Because women have felt the need to assume masculine attributes and characteristics in order to succeed and fit in with established company cultures.

The Working Circle proposes that following a circle (a more feminine shape), rather than a line, will enable you to include the intuitive with the linear, the masculine and the feminine. Keep in mind, in business, balanced decision making, which leads to effective and creative conflict resolution, is a necessity, not a luxury.

When we use a process that engages both our masculine and feminine sides, we can excel in new ways. This is what The

Working Circle offers: new ways to excel. Women using this process tap into their intuition more openly, thus offering richer, more well-rounded perspectives and information when considering complex issues. Men using this process can expand on and extend their linear, masculine take on issues by adding the ability—and willingness—to be collaborative and creative.

We all have both feminine and masculine aspects to our personalities, and by learning to incorporate them in our dealings with one another, we can expand our ability to reach out to each other in new and more effective ways.

Where Does Destructive Conflict Come From?

Let's face it, conflict and work go together, and conflict of a destructive nature (as opposed to the constructive form) takes our focus away from doing the job we are paid for and shifts us into political maneuvering. Whenever I conduct an organization assessment (the process of figuring out what makes an organization succeed or stumble), I ask the question, "What's the culture like here?" More often than not, the response is something vague like, "It's crazy here!" Everyone absorbs the culture, but few can really articulate its norms and unwritten rules. This is unfortunate, because it is these norms and unwritten rules that describe the values of the organization much more accurately than any plaque on the wall or on your desk given to you by the company.

Just where does all that craziness come from? From observing organizations ranging from government agencies to academic institutions to churches to corporations, I have come up with a list of the primary sources of all that debilitating conflict:

1. *Poorly designed jobs.* Jobs that have overlapping responsibilities and ill-defined accountabilities leave workers

scurrying to achieve and compete needlessly. In other words, you and your coworkers think that what has to be done resides with each of you. Or, worse, none of you think it is your job. Either way, the people involved begin to view each other with mistrust and resentment. Management either takes sides or sees the employees themselves as the problems to be solved, rather than the job descriptions. Few in the organization see the root cause is actually job design, so the individuals involved remain in a conflict that can't be resolved.

2. *Unrealistic orientations.* If your company's orientation is about filling out forms and adding up the number of hours you worked, and telling you how many hours you are scheduled to work, along with policies and more policies, it is insufficient and ineffective. Orientations that don't give you what you *really* need to know about what it takes to succeed ("Working long hours goes a long way here"), and what the culture is *really* like ("We want you to settle your own conflicts") don't help people to succeed and learn. I've seen executives come to orientations and talk about what a great place the company is, and how risk-taking is encouraged. They forget to mention what happens to people who fail or disagree with the party line. Ouch!

3. *Win-lose compensation plans.* Usually compensation plans are designed to increase profit and reward performers. So far so good. But sometimes the plan pits divisions and/or people against each other. As much as some executives enjoy and promote this approach, it encourages destructive conflict. Data flows if the lifeblood of organizational success, but, under this model, people don't share necessary information with each other. The

quintessential example is the shoe store where the sales-people are all on commission. When you walk in, they attack you as if you were a deer in the forest and they were the hunters. Ugh!

4. *Managers who mean well but don't know how to manage conflict.* You've met them; we all have. They gossip with you about your coworkers, and in doing so feed the fires of conflict. A manager should *never* participate in office gossip, as taking sides empowers one position and weakens the other. Managers may be conflict avoiders themselves, doing whatever it takes to steer clear of any confrontation, in an effort to maintain the peace and/or to be liked. Or they simply don't know how to handle difficult employees and by not dealing with them let them, in essence, run the shop. This type of manager is extremely frustrating, because, of course, the general employee population expects them to lead, not allow the bullies or whiners to take charge. Most of the time, these well-meaning but unskilled managers are likeable, yet hapless. The good news is, they are usually not hopeless—if the organization recognizes the problem and provides intensive coaching for the managers who need it.

5. *Training programs that aren't reinforced.* In companies across the United States, billions of dollars are spent on training programs each year. As far as I'm concerned, most of it is wasted. Why? When was the last time you went to a training class and, afterward, your manager asked you what the class was about and what he or she could do to reinforce what you had learned? Other than technical training, the skills that are taught at such programs are rarely reinforced in practice. Here's an example: I was teaching front-line supervisors basic

supervisory skills, and a week after the class concluded, was talking to one of the participants. He told me he really enjoyed the class, after which I asked him how his manager felt about what he had learned. Here's what he said his manager told him: "Forget what they taught you in that class; just go out and kick ass." Case closed!

6. *Noncash reward systems that reward combativeness.* At one company I worked for, the people who screamed and whined the loudest got the perks—not necessarily the biggest bonuses (although that happened, too), but the best offices, the great trips, the choice assignments. Admittedly, some of these individuals did bring in exemplary results, but they forgot they were part of a team. Whenever they screamed, management rolled over. What was the unspoken message to the rest of us? "To get what you want, you have to be an uncooperative narcissist!"

7. *Frustrated managers/business owners who don't know how to regulate their anger.* A coaching client of mine, a really wonderful guy, had been called to the carpet for berating and demeaning his employees. When I met with him, he told me about his church and his family with tears in his eyes. But he was extraordinarily frustrated with the manufacturing process at work: people weren't doing what they were supposed to. His staff was struggling, and getting the blame for a lot of things that weren't their fault. Consequently, he regularly lost his cool. Although his anger and frustrations were justified, his outbursts were not, and without realizing it he was firing up conflict between his staff and other departments—quality control, R&D, engineering, and others. The point is, *just because he was right did not justify his actions.* Another

man I worked with, an entrepreneur, would frequently lose his temper and walk through the company. Whenever this happened, everyone would run for cover, trying to hide and avoid his wrath. The result? Productivity slipped. Here, too, this man's anger was justified, but not his actions.

8. *Company norms that don't encourage truth-telling.* You sit at a meeting and you know that 80 percent of what is being said is either not the truth or not what really needs to be said. So you sit there, looking at your watch, texting your buddy, or thinking of all the productive things you *could* be doing instead. You wish that someone would just tell it like it is for once, so the real issues could be addressed and you all could get on doing what you're supposed to be doing.

Just today I consulted with a small business owner who has two employees that are, as he described them, "lazy and not pulling their weight." I asked why they were still employed at the firm. The answer? No one had the heart (or guts) to fire them. Believe it or not, the owner was "hoping" these troublesome employees would one day wake up on their own so that he could avoid having to face a sticky situation. In a small company, where resources are especially critical, anyone not pulling his or her weight becomes an albatross around everyone else's neck. And if no one speaks the truth about employees not pulling their own weight, they will have no idea that they are failing.

Meanwhile, understandably, the other employees resented the two underperformers, who caused them to bear heavier workloads. More gasoline being poured on the flames of conflict! I don't need to paint the picture in any greater detail, do I?

Another example of the damage not telling the truth can do is the company or division where no one tells the boss the truth. What's really going on? He or she exists in a filtered cloud of information, and thus makes decisions that either hurt the business or foment conflict, or both.

9. *Blaming behavior and responsibility avoidance.* You've seen this, I am sure: A mistake happens at work and no one claims responsibility. Just the opposite, in fact: everyone scurries around trying to avoid blame. You ask someone what happened and he or she points to someone else. That kind of behavior fuels the flames of conflict and mistrust. I call this one the "blame game." When I first observed it, I asked my manager (with the naïveté of a young professional) why many senior people acted in such an irresponsible manner. His response sticks in my head to this day: "Because they have more at stake." It seemed to me that having more at stake would lead one to be impeccably responsible, but my boss chalked up my opinion to inexperience.

Keep in mind that the higher up you go on the corporate ladder, the more ripples your actions create. I still can't fathom why leaders allow themselves to behave as if avoiding responsibility will help them or the organization. What do you think? Isn't that exactly why we have so little trust in the people we elect?

At the lower end of the organizational chart, blaming behavior often flourishes. So much time gets wasted as a result; it is immeasurable.

10. *Just plain pains in the butt!* These are people who cause problems no matter where they go. We need to immunize against them! You have met many of them, no doubt; we all have. They are the topic of conversation/gossip in the

cafeteria; they are the butt of jokes. When I work in groups with someone like this in them, it seems no one knows quite how to deal with them. Enter The Working Circle!

Understanding where conflict comes from, how it arises, can help you to better deal with it. Recognizing and being able to characterize the different kinds of people who typically cause conflict is another invaluable tool.

Coworkers Who Instigate Conflict

We've all had experience with people who drive us crazy at work for one reason or another. Often, the conflict we have with them affects us personally—we report to a boss who doesn't know how to manage disagreements, or must collaborate with a colleague whose inability or unwillingness to carry his or her own weight affects our performance.

Let's take a look at the behavior of some troublesome types of coworkers—what it is about them that incites conflict—and then consider typical ways that organizations and people attempt to address and deal with these individuals. The usual methods generally are ineffective in resolving the conflicts they generate and, over time, the instigators end up with too much power and influence.

The Pot-Stirrer

I'll begin by describing the type I refer to as the "pot-stirrer," using as an example a receptionist at a company I worked for. This woman was delightful in many ways. She had a wonderful English accent. My office was down the hall from reception, and when my door was open, I could hear her as she answered

the phone repeatedly during the day—not because she was loud, but because the office had an open-space design.

This receptionist was, however, a pot-stirrer. She would gossip all day, telling various people stories she had picked up or heard from someone else. Consequently, she was a source for much office intrigue. She would often tell one person what someone else had said about him or her. Gossip of this nature is one of the longstanding wellsprings of conflict. How many times have I become incensed after someone told me something that someone else said about me? Too many times to count! Most of the time, this really isn't useful information, and it often isn't accurate. Rather, the source of the information typically has some agenda he or she is working. Even if the source is a friend, the information is just that: information. These days, if someone tells me something that another person said about me, I just say, "Thank you," and move on. I also have made it a practice never to do that to anyone else. This kind of information gathering rarely, if ever, helps. On the contrary, it stirs the pot.

The Loner

Bill, a peer of mine, was so insecure that he insisted on making every decision himself. Working with him was an experience in constantly feeling shut out. My role was to collaborate with him on various initiatives, yet he never wanted to meet or work together. Instead, I would get missives about what he had done and what he had accomplished.

The loner functions only for himself and his progress, and is usually deaf to the ideas of others—unless of course those ideas come from the boss or the loner. People working with loners often go home feeling unheard, unsatisfied, and, so, frustrated.

There's another factor that comes into play when you make decisions only for yourself, versus joining with others to meet a common objective: it's called creativity. Creativity at work should not be an accident; It should be encouraged as part of the culture.

Having a vision requires the ability to take a clear, balanced look at the past, present, and future, and factor all of these into our final plan of action. However, because we are so busy, our lives are so fast-paced and so focused on what's going on today, we often ignore these steps of balanced thinking completely. As a result, short-term thinking can result in decision making that brings short-term, rather than long-term, results.

The Pleaser

When managers or employees want to be liked, you'll often see them contributing, offering ideas; they are always willing to put in their two cents. While on the surface this appears to be a collaborative approach, there can be a definite downside to it: they may just be telling the boss what he or she wants to hear. And if this happens often enough, you'll find that those individuals can't be trusted to think independently at all. In high school, we called this "brownnosing."

Many managers have told me that they don't want independent thinkers on their staffs; rather, they want the people who work for them to toe the line. These same managers are those who can't be away from the office because, "No one here can make a decision besides me!" Be careful what you ask for!

The pleaser doesn't make decisions; he or she just mimics what the boss wants. Those who want to think independently and contribute intelligence to the conversation start to resent

the pleaser. Mistrust begins to grow, and that fuels the fires of conflict.

Most people justifiably see the pleaser as weak and unable to make decisions without help. This is obviously not a management profile that bodes well, either for individual or group success. Colleagues usually find themselves working around pleasers, thereby avoiding conflict and disempowering them. As a result, the team is seriously weakened.

If the pleaser is a team member, and the boss has a healthy level of self-confidence, the boss sees right through the pleaser's actions. Conversely, if the boss has low self-esteem and enjoys the constant affirmations from the pleaser, the team resents the pleaser even more. Either way, he or she causes conflict and mistrust. Some team members will feed the pleaser information that they want to filter to the boss. This breeds an environment marked by intense manipulation and abiding mistrust.

The Know-it-all

The flip side of the pleaser is the person who wants to shine, to stand out, even if it's at everyone else's expense. Take Dick, a manager who was offered a rather quick and substantial promotion in another division of his company. He was on the fast track and wanted to stay there: no one was going to stand in his way. At every meeting, with peers as well as staff, he had the answer to every question, had the data that no one else had. This was the case even if his answers weren't exactly factual. He was a challenge to work with.

Whenever Dick had made a decision, he would tell his confidants what he wanted to do and how wise his decision was. He would whisper that senior management was aligned

with him (whether this was true or not), so all his confidants could do was agree with him. They knew there was no point in expressing their concerns or opinions, as Dick didn't really want to hear them.

Six months after Dick began his new job, people began transferring out of the division, and the rumor mill was rife with negative stories about him.

Watch out for that rumor mill—it is speedier and more effective than an organizationwide announcement!

The Chosen One

This type is one that always makes me laugh (if not out loud, at least to myself). The chosen one is the professional who thinks that the sun rises and sets on him or her. Everything good that happens is a result of his or her actions, inputs, or ideas. The word "we" is not in their lexicon. The chosen ones intimate either directly or indirectly that they have the ear of senior management. Their message to you suggests that you need to follow them if you want to succeed.

Believing that someone might be a chosen one makes it hard to deal with the conflict he or she stirs up. So what people often do is to wait in the bushes for the chosen one to slip and tumble. That might be an effective conflict strategy, but it also might backfire. People blindly jump on the bandwagon, ignore the chosen one, or undermine him or her. None of these machinations are good for the establishment!

The Wet Blanket

I am sure that you have met this person many, many times. No matter what you or anyone else says, wet blankets have something negative to say in response. No matter how good

an idea might be, they have something critical to say about it. Personally, when I'm in a less than collaborative mood, I want to wring their necks! (Of course, with a doctorate in conflict resolution, I don't do it. But the mental image is quite delightful.)

If given too much power and/or credence, wet blankets take the air out of any discussion. But what usually happens is that they are challenged, and an argument ensues. The argument is either on the table or subterranean—more political maneuvering to undermine the wet blanket. This takes the focus away from the issue at hand, ticks people off, and leaves them less able to effectively problem solve.

I remember one particular scene: Connor, a team leader, was listening to differing opinions about his team and his management style. He wanted to get to the bottom of his issues so he could improve his style and motivate his team. He proposed a solution for one issue, and then asked for the staff's reactions and ideas.

Sue, a long-time associate, said, "Hey, Connor, remember when we tried something like this four years ago? It was a bad idea then and it won't work now."

After Sue said that, the room went quiet. She was viewed as negative, and so disregarded. When that happened, she became more negative still, further eroding team cohesion. Sue was stuck in the past, and rather than learning from it, she used it as her reason to remain negative. Her wet blanket behavior effectively shut down constructive conversation.

Fortunately, The Working Circle can be a highly effective means of moving wet blankets into a more promising future by showing them how focusing on how the past can be a source of learning, and bring positive results. This enables them to move ahead with confidence, and avoid blaming others for past mistakes.

The "My Porridge Is Too Hot" Client

We've all had interactions with these people, and maybe have actually behaved like this ourselves from time to time. (I certainly have, especially when I'm angry for being put on hold for an interminable amount of time!)

This client type is never satisfied, no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try. He or she has little patience, and prefers to accuse, rather than engage in a reasoned debate or discussion of options. If there is a cursory discussion, this person will dismiss suggestions from others almost as soon as they're uttered, or present a cold shoulder to any who counters his or her ideas. They are a particular challenge because they are customers/clients.

Clients like this can ruin your day. Many of us find ourselves intimidated, put off by this type, and would rather avoid them than deal with them. An employee who is seen as challenging this type of client may be accused of failing to be customer-oriented, and ends up even more frustrated than before. Ever find yourself in that situation?

"I've Got an Excuse for Everything" Worker

Many years ago I taught fifth grade in Brooklyn, New York. There were kids who didn't do their homework, didn't bring in forms that required parental signatures, and on and on. They always had an excuse; some were reasonable, some were outlandish. When I went into the corporate world, I saw what these children looked like when they became adults. Oh my!

Meeting deadlines is important, and doing so is particularly important to me. I remember Tom, who worked for me in Chicago. He was consistently late meeting assigned deadlines. His excuses were, at the beginning, understandable, especially

when they had to do with his health. But then the excuses got more and more peculiar, as he couldn't keep repeating the same ones. I had to stifle my laughter, because the projects his lateness was interfering with were important, and I didn't want to undermine the seriousness of the situation.

These people can also be infuriating, as they hurt themselves and the team. One day, when I was out of town, Tom stormed out of the office, never to be seen again. My demands and his excuses had done him in!

The Whiner

I remember seeing a comic strip many years ago that stuck in my head. It was a drawing of a group of customers sitting at a bar, one of which was a donkey (or as we also say, an ass). The caption underneath the drawing read, "There's always one at every bar!" That's how I relate to the whiner.

If there is a bonus, the bonus isn't enough. If there is a new project, it is too difficult, and takes time away from other projects. If a new employee joins the team, he or she is not as good as the previous employee. You get the picture. Whiners suck the energy out of a team, leaving a vacuum that commonly gets filled with tension and conflict—the tension built off of the exasperation of others.

Very often, coworkers and managers try to assuage the whiner, which only leads to more whining. These people are perpetual downers who contribute little of value to the team's well-being and productivity.

Bosses Who Cause or Exacerbate Conflict

The higher up you go on the corporate ladder, the greater impact you have on the way conflict originates and is handled

at the company. Here are some examples of management styles that make life much more difficult for the rest of the employees.

The Well-Meaning Gossip

Sandy, one of my former managers, was a well-meaning, intelligent woman who was unable to have a cohesive team. The reason is that she would talk about each of us to our peers, and then tell each of us what the others said (positive and negative) about us. Unwittingly, she was setting us up to be combative and uncooperative. When a team is like that, its members withhold critical information from one another in order to maintain the upper hand.

Another manager I knew would join staff members in maligning a certain individual on the team, usually the outcast. Jokes would be made at the outcast's expense, with the manager often participating. The outcast, over time, of course became totally disenfranchised and disempowered. Why have someone on the team who has no effectiveness?

Managers who set their team members against each other have teams that could be much more productive than they are. Their unconscious (and sometimes conscious) untrustworthy behavior makes it a real challenge to be collaborative with one's peers. The result is that team members are at each other's throats, and often don't know the real reason—the boss!

The "My Way or the Highway" Boss

Tony, who was head of collections at a Fortune 50 company, had a powerful personality. He stood about 6'2", and was not a lightweight. The first time I attended a management meeting that he convened, I was startled to see that no one

would speak without first glancing at him. Even if the person was addressing someone else, he or she checked in with Tony as if to confirm that what he or she was saying was okay with him. And everyone knew when what they said was *not* okay: Tony glared and motioned with a hand to move on. It was a daunting experience to be the presenter (which I was) at one of those meetings!

I recall once asking for input on a human resources initiative I was working on at this company. One by one, each of Tony's managers made negative, unsupportive comments about my project. I was young then, and easily deflated. After the meeting, one of my peers in HR told me he had been in the men's room earlier, and had heard Tony talking to two of his managers (he had a total of nine).

"Tony instructed them to reject your project," my friend said. I was, in my naïveté, shocked and crushed. But I also learned something important, and subsequently developed a new strategy to deal with Tony, one that didn't include seeking input from his managers. Instead, he and I went head to head, with me attempting to meet his objections. I did make some progress—and, as I said, learned some lessons about this kind of manager.

Tony was successful for a long time, but his style ultimately became his downfall. He was retired a few years later.

The Moody Manager

When this type of manager is, "on," the place just hums. Everyone is productive and the stress level comes down. But when this boss goes "off," everyone runs to their offices or cubicles. Many small business owners are like this, though this type certainly isn't limited to small organizations. The moody manager runs hot and cold, according to his or her moods,

fears, or level of excitement. Such individuals don't understand the impact their moods and actions have on others.

I have also witnessed small business owners who share their fears with their employees, which generally get magnified by the employees. And, as we all know, fear can bring out negative behavior. At the very least, it slows productivity. That negative behavior can also bring about conflict, conflict that these leaders aren't capable of handling because they are trapped by their own fear. Organizations then become either stalled or internally driven, instead of market driven.

When the moody manager is on, he or she prances around the office telling jokes or stories of their successes. This behavior has less of a negative impact on the staff, as the good mood is contagious. It is when the switch goes off that conflict and upset arise, distracting employees from the business at hand.

We have all seen television shows and movies that depict office workers gearing themselves up for the entrance of the moody manager. Everyone holds their breath until they determine which mood the boss is in, and what that will mean for their workday. It is the manager's job to build motivation and invoke a positive mood among the staff, not to impose his or her bad mood on everyone else.

The Boss Who Can't Delegate

"Why should I delegate? It will take less time to do it myself!"

This is the boss whose inbox is a mile high, who is always stressed, and who slows things down because he or she is always overworked. This results in chaos, a team lacking discipline, and confusion. Chaos is a powerful fuel for conflict, due to mixed signals, unclear accountabilities, and stalled decision making. This boss hoards work (with good

intentions, most of the time), forcing the staff to go to him or her before making even the smallest decisions.

Bosses who can't, or won't, delegate real responsibility, only know how to assign tasks. A staff that does not have decision-making power can only contribute dribs and drabs to the business. They become a bunch of doers, without also being thinkers. What eventually happens is, they start fighting over the few morsels of power that might be on the horizon. This conflict then leads the boss to believe that he or she is correct in not giving them decision-making power. It is a vicious cycle: the business produces more automatons, while the boss grows old at a very young age.

Summary

Those are some of the ways to, and some of the people who, fuel conflict in organizations. It doesn't matter what kind of organization it is—a government agency, a for-profit business, or a nonprofit institution. Most of the time, the individuals described here are well-meaning. (Note that the list could have been much longer, but I chose the most prevalent ones, as well as those I work with most frequently using The Working Circle).

What, then, is the best way to handle business conflicts when they affect you and the success of your group? Enter The Working Circle! As demonstrated in the following pages, this approach will enable you to think things through (alone or as part of a team); incorporate a wide variety of factors and ideas; and examine the past, present, and future without disempowering anyone. In the end, both individuals and teams are strengthened, as everyone gets to play a positive role in reaching the best decisions and achieving success.