



BOOK EXCERPT

How turf battles shred workplace morale

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Many of today's workplaces have become battle zones. Most people would say this is caused by increased competition among managers for dwindling resources – the result of cost cutting in an economic downturn. However, another more deeply underlying problem pervades society and particularly the modern business world. Workplace battles are often caused by the selfish behaviour of individuals who are more concerned with their own career growth than with making sound business decisions.



TALKING MANAGEMENT

Video: Applying ER lessons to the management world

Company loyalty is thrown out the window in exchange for personal gain; workers no longer see any benefit to working together on the same team and spend most of their energy on how they can quickly get ahead. Managers and ambitious employees look for the "quick win" that will gain them recognition, bonuses, promotions – and the increased status that goes along with them.



TALKING MANAGEMENT

Video: How to keep your organization nimble and innovative

Add in today's challenging economy and the increased focus on belt tightening and the situation becomes even more pervasive. It's dog-eat-dog, with turf wars at every turn – and may the strongest one win. The battles take a huge toll on the organization as a whole and all the people who work within it. Too often, the politically motivated actions of these individuals exacerbate the situations they were supposed to remedy.



TALKING MANAGEMENT

Video: Why tops dogs are often the most vocal ones

Belt tightening can be a good thing when it forces us to identify the true sources of inefficiencies and waste, a review that companies should conduct on a regular basis. However, too often companies make across-the-board cost-cutting decisions without looking at program efficiencies, and strike with a broad and indiscriminate stroke. This can result in cutting necessary infrastructure rather than a failing pet program. Planning and training costs, which become more important with fewer resources, are often the first items targeted to be cut.

This behaviour follows a familiar pattern. In an attempt to reduce costs, internal staffing is cut, but management expects equal performance from the remaining employees. The training budgets are slashed or removed entirely. Consequently, work becomes rushed, corners are cut, and attention to detail is thrown out the window. Quality drops, resulting in lost sales, and the cycle repeats itself.

Enter Dave, hired as a new manager to take over a division that was mired in problems, including terrible morale and unhappy customers. In the interview, confident Dave assured the manager that he could "fix the place in 30 days."

What Dave's boss failed to tell him was that he would have no access to his predecessor, and he was inheriting a disgruntled deputy who had applied for Dave's job and didn't get it. Dave now had to deal with Linda, who was unco-operative to an extreme. Linda had good reason to resent Dave from the start. She had been acting in his position for a number of months and felt slighted when she wasn't promoted to his job. "I'm not getting anything out of this, and I'm not respected, so why should I care?" was her attitude. "I'll just do what I need to do to get by until something better comes up." It was a recipe for underperformance and a no-win situation.

The only thing that they seemed to do well was attack each other. Linda had the institutional knowledge to be an asset to Dave, but because of her attitude, she refused to help him. She constantly undermined him with the employees and customers with comments like, "Since Dave has so much great experience, he should be able to answer that question." Linda could have helped Dave and become a valuable asset to her new boss. Unfortunately – for both of them – she drew her battle lines and initiated the first attacks.

Dave realized very quickly that he couldn't count on Linda, so he brought in his own team, selected for their previous loyalty to him. However, they quickly became overwhelmed because they didn't know what they were doing and Linda was doing nothing to help them. Dave got back at Linda by assigning a lot of his work to her, but she spent most of her energy on finding another job and using up her leave balance. As a result, Dave became increasingly frustrated and began to lash out at others to divert attention from his own problems. His new people tried to protect him by blaming everything on Linda and her people. The clash of egos between the two factions continued as skirmishes were won and lost.

For a while, these conflicts languished in a state of deadlock – like trench warfare, where neither party seems to give an inch. At this point, Dave and Linda had something in common: a bad attitude. The job goals they had set out to accomplish became secondary as they went into survival mode, hanging on as long as they could in a war of attrition, with Linda hoping her boss would leave or she would find another job and Dave hoping that Linda would leave so he could be free of her undermining actions.

Where was Dave's boss during all of this? In most cases, unless the shrapnel strikes uncomfortably close to the executive office, there is no meaningful intervention from senior management. After all, their policies created the mess to begin with. Most of the time, they let the turf battles play themselves out because eventually – and virtually without fail – one of the combatants is going to win and the loser will move on. In our story, as is true in most cases, the one who didn't get the job (Linda) is usually the one who has to leave.