

# Countering interpersonal conflicts at the workplace

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Today's IT workplace is becoming increasingly intolerant of performance deviations, and there is no dearth of triggers for conflicts. Desikamani G says that we have become habituated to living in a conflictful environment

Increasing number of men and women working in an IT environment are facing serious health challenges. We note with sadness the increasing relationship problems and burnout that IT employees are facing in their personal lives. The root cause of most illnesses today is the mind, which gets fatigued and abused by a variety of factors. Overwork and lack of rest is a primary cause.

## Interpersonal conflicts

However, I would rate interpersonal conflicts as the most dangerous and almost lethal factor. For a man who is not very adaptive in his behaviour and low on maturity, it is a sureshot

killer over a period of time. The effect conflicts have on the longterm productivity and realization of potential of an individual are significant.

Today's IT workplace is becoming lesser and lesser tolerant of performance deviations, and there is no dearth of triggers for conflicts. On the flipside, it has become so habitual to live in a conflictful environment, that one begins to feel weird on a completely conflict-free day.

## The source

Interpersonal conflicts are triggered when the behaviour exhibited by one person does not match the behaviour expected by the other person who he is dealing with. Heavily dependent on preferences of one another, and given the fact that nature has made so many varieties of us, sources of this type of a conflict knows no limits.

In fact, every time I visit an ATM I notice people either yelling or showing their anger or irritation to the machine and the less subtle ones to a security guard outside the ATM. The interface may have changed from the irritable queue and the customer unfriendly teller of the nationalised bank to the air-conditioned environs of an ATM, but the basics of our approach don't change much.

Interpersonal conflicts drain people of energy and affects productivity - both long-term and short-term.

## Stimulus or emotion

Since the source of all conflicts is in the mind, with some effort it is possible to work on this killer problem which depletes happiness out of many IT lives. A quick reflection of our responses to stressful situations will lead us to the root of this problem.

Imagine driving a car on a seemingly empty road early morning. You naturally tend to drive fast and suddenly you notice an old man on a bicycle coming out of the lane from the left, 10 feet in front of you. What do you do? Of course hit the brake and halt to a screech. And then... "abuse the old man" is a very mild description of your possible behaviour.

Look at the chain of events—you applied the brake (stimulus)—you threw abuse at the old man (response).

## Is that all?

What lies between the stimulus and response is an emotion which is the key trigger of interpersonal conflicts. In this scenario, what were you responding to? You thought you responded to the stimulus but you actually responded to the emotion. What do you want to respond to - stimulus or the emotion?

## Chain reaction

The reality is that it is the behaviour of people, and more importantly different preferences we have as individuals, which cause interpersonal conflicts. And behaviours which are not in line with our preferences cause negative emotions. The stimulus emotion response chain follows.

I have a firm belief that almost all people in this world come with good intentions. However, it is their behaviour which is misunderstood or does not match the preferences of the other person and therefore causes conflict.

In my organization development consulting work, I have often empirically proved to companies that even a small change in the way we respond to behaviour induced conflicts at workplace leads to significant improvement of productivity.

All it calls for is to work on a paradigm “different is not equal to wrong”. This actually requires us to listen carefully to understand behaviour preferences of people and give them the right to be what they are. This is especially true of the IT environment.

Bottom-line, the strategy for happiness in the IT workplace of today or tomorrow is simple, “understand preferences and adapt your behaviour to the situation or the person.” Research on successful people the world over has tons of evidence to back this.

Whenever I take people through this idea in a training intervention, there’s always the cynical response, “its much easier said than done.” I quite agree. Adaptation of behaviour is quite stressful and calls for skill and practice. Isn’t that what we call as maturity? And there’s always a small price to pay. A more pragmatic way of looking at life would help us conclude that stress

arising out of adaptation is far less harmful and easily manageable than the stress resulting from interpersonal conflicts. Isn’t your happiness and health a matter of your choice?