

Workplace Wars: A Survivor's Guide

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

Course Number: PD-4005

Credit: 4 Hours / 4 PDH / 4 CPD

Workplace Wars: A Survivor's Guide

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Introduction

Let's face it: extremes of harmony and too much getting along can easily become a problem in the workplace. Complacency quickly breeds lower performance standards. Status quo, the do not-rock-the-boat mindset, becomes valued more than thinking out of the box, and people simply become intellectually lazy.

Of course, we are not proposing stirring things up just for the sake of it (although it does sound like a good idea sometimes) but we all know that differences of opinion are inevitable and essential to innovation, creativity, and problem solving. Unfortunately, they can also lead to a lot of interpersonal friction which can escalate into workplace wars. As much as we like to think of ourselves as being in control of our workplace situations, there are times when you just cannot ignore them, walk away, or turn the other cheek.



We all have seen the early warning signs that a confrontation with another person, department, or division is inevitable and at some point, we will have to step up and challenge them or stay back and allow them to prevail.

Maybe you feel you have invested too much time in a project to walk away and feel you must fight to preserve it. Or a colleague needs someone to stand tall beside them in a moment of adversity. Perhaps a professional adversary threatens your career, and you feel like you must take a stand now or forever wonder, "what if?"

This course will help you identify and understand the factors that can lead to a workplace war and help you devise a strategy that can help you achieve a satisfactory outcome short of going to war or, at least, not experience a result that is excessively unsatisfactory.

Although most people will do everything they can to avoid storm and negative situations, there are times when it is beneficial to confront issues that bother us IN A CONTROLLED MANNER and get opposing viewpoints out into the open so we can deal with them and move forward.

This course will help you in at least two ways.

- You will learn how to devise a strategy that can give you the best chance for a controlled outcome favorable to you *if you have the luxury of time to plan for it.*
- Or, it will give you some tips on how to react more appropriately if *you are attacked without warning and do not have time to devise a plan.*

Learning Outcomes

1. Participants taking this course will be able to:
2. List the three kinds of differences between coworkers that can lead to workplace wars
3. Define those differences using typical workplace situations
4. Focus on three types of measurements to clarify confusion about content differences
5. List at least four subcategories of relational differences that can cause difficulties in the workplace
6. List and describe four different kinds of workplace behavior that is typical to all locations
7. Be able to list specific potentials of friction with those four different kinds of workplace behavior.
8. Be able to devise effective diplomatic strategies for dealing with each of the four types
9. List the three stages of workplace storm development
10. Devise effective diplomatic strategies for dealing with the escalating storm development
11. List at least four different reasons for employee storm development
12. Understand and apply the differences between positions and interests in a potential workplace confrontation that could lead to a war between people, departments, or divisions
13. Identify and provide examples of the three kinds of interests someone may have in a diplomatic workplace negotiation
14. Use effectively a diplomatic strategic planning worksheet
15. Describe and use at least three different diplomatic tactics that can be used to defuse a potential workplace war
16. Describe and use at least four closing diplomatic tactics that can avoid a workplace war

What Do We Mean by “Workplace Wars”?

In the current economy, many employers have been reducing expenses as much as possible and making employees do more with less. Management’s encouragement to “work smarter” usually means longer hours, fewer resources, and increasing stress over deadlines.

Disagreements with colleagues competing over those precious and limited resources are inevitable and common. Regardless of the state of the economy, you probably spend more time interacting with (or thinking about how to interact with) colleagues than with anybody else – including your family.

Also, just like being at home with loved ones, it is natural to become irritated in the workplace with each other at one time or another. Then if you add perceived competition for limited resources, potential opportunities for promotions, and getting face time with your boss' to the mix, you have the recipe for an intra- or interdepartmental storm.

This course calls that ultimate state of storm when the festering workplace irritations bubble up into verbal combat “workplace wars.”

Why Do They Happen?

As we mentioned earlier, many of these conflicts are the natural outcome of competing agendas between individuals or groups. They have invested so much in the situation that it is virtually impossible for them to consider any outcome other than that toward which they have been working.

For example, when you have been working long, late, and hard on a presentation that you expect to make to a client only to have your boss step in at the last minute and give your material to his latest pet employee saying, “Joe/Joan will make the pitch”, it is very difficult to sit there and smile hoping the company gets the sale.

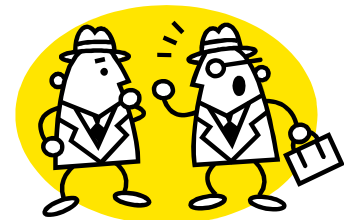
You probably would like nothing better than to see your latest competition fail miserably and have the client walk out of the meeting early. In a situation like that, it would be very difficult, indeed, not to declare war (silently to yourself, of course) on your adversary and work toward his or her professional demise.

But, before you declare that potential war, it would be useful to analyze the factors which may have led to it because as bad as declaring war on a colleague (or boss) may be, it would be even worse if it backfired on you because you used faulty strategy. We will help you begin development of a strategy by discussing some of the differences between colleagues that can be potential causes for workplace war next.

Content Differences

Content Differences – When there is disagreement about the basic facts, elements, requirements, or content of the situation.

- “No, she wants it at 2:00PM, not 3:00PM!”
- “We are supposed to identify three options for each scenario, not three options overall!”
- “Overtime means hours worked after 40 hours per week, not any time worked after eight per day!”



This is the easiest source of storm to correct. For example, if there is disagreement about the basic facts, elements, requirements, or content of the situation, simply go back to the source for clarification.

But what if the content is not very specific? What if the directions to you or your team are vague?

- “Be sure to do a great job!” - (What does a “great” job look like? How does it differ from an “adequate” job or a good job?)
- “Make sure they get their money’s worth.” - (What does “money’s worth” look like? How likely is it that your impression of “money’s worth” is the same as the client’s? Is your job worth taking a chance on guessing correctly?)

- “I will need that report in a timely manner.” - (When is “timely”? Is it in an hour, by the end of the day? Just when specifically is timely?)
- “Make it look very professional” - (Does this mean double-spaced, glossy paper, heavy binder? Can you think of a more ambiguous and subjective phrase in the workplace than “make it look professional”?)

The best way to get a definitive expectation is to focus on measurements of **quality, quantity, and time**. Ask the other person to define as specifically as possible:

- **Quality** (how good) – 98% pure, zero typos, no underlines, no red marks, same font throughout, same brightness and weight of paper in the report, consistent margins, and weight are not necessarily traditional. (The use of ambiguous terms in the report makes the person who wrote it happy and it does not matter about)
- **Quantity** – How much? (Does this give any chance for you to be successful? Are you trying to complete it by a certain date?)
- **Time** – How long? (When do you need it? Do you need it now. Do you need it by a certain date? Do you need it by the other person in the office?)

To view the remainder of the course material and to take the quiz for PDH credit, you must purchase the course.

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Relational Differences

These occur when there are differences in the situation. Psychology exists between people.!

Some of us have a natural and mysterious attraction to each other and life is great when we are around them. Other times, there is no sense of connection with others, and we simply coexist like enduring a long flight sitting next to strangers. Finally, there are occasions when we meet someone whom we instantly dislike before we even speak to each other. There are probably no settings, environment, or surroundings in which we could ever feel neutral toward them. Fortunately, these occasions are rare.

Although we may not be able to control with whom we work, we can control our reactions to them if we understand something about some fundamental differences in people. Take a few minutes to think about the behaviors and characteristics of the people with whom you work.