

CHAPTER 7

What We Are Arguing About Matters: Sources of Conflict

Yes, what we are arguing about does make a difference. What do we disagree about? Is it the terms of the contract? Are we struggling with how we can get the task done? Or who does what and when? Or does the argument touch on our very core values and principles? Standing back and thinking about a disagreement before you begin to discuss the matter with someone else can help you find your way through the conflict to reach a resolution.

Figure 7-1 shows most sources of conflict on the left-hand side, arranged from those that are easiest to resolve to those that are hardest to handle.

Information conflicts can be relatively simple to resolve, once you recognize them as such. Conflicts of interests and expectations take a little more time to understand. Once you do, however, you often can open up options that will meet the needs of each person involved. Structural conflicts are often out of the control of the parties involved, so resolving them requires new strategies. Conflicts in values are by and large not

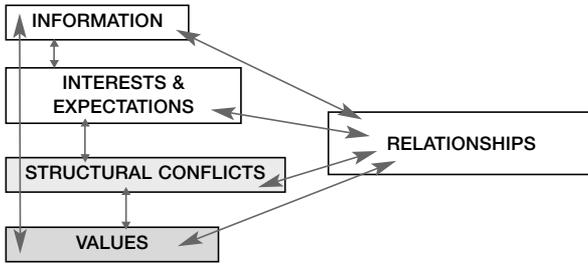


Figure 7-1. Sources of conflict.

negotiable. You must first identify that the differences are about core values themselves, then you can begin to find a way to the other side of the conflict. As you see later in this chapter, however, conflicts may not fall simply into one category or another, and often have effects on each other.

Now, take a look at the right-hand side of Figure 7-1: “relationships.” Arrows point back and forth between relationship conflicts and all of the other types of conflict because relationship conflicts make all of the others more difficult to resolve, and because other conflicts can complicate relationship conflicts. In this chapter, I first describe all of the conflict sources in the left-hand column, then I tackle the challenges of relationship conflicts.

Information

Information conflicts are disagreements about facts or data: the numbers written in the report, what the policy or the contract says. These can be the easiest conflicts to address. If the disagreement is about information—I have one set of facts and you have another—once you identify that as the problem, you and the other party can agree on where to get information that you both will accept.

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“Request denied.” Karyn read the message on her screen, too stunned to think. She was beyond exhaustion; her mother was still at home, sick and frail. Karyn had submitted a request for advanced leave to deal with this most recent round of trouble.

Just a few minutes before, Richard was in his office, scrolling through the day's endless list of e-mail requests and directives. Projects were piling up, staff were calling in sick. How was he supposed to get the work done with the round of flu that was sweeping through the office? And here was Karyn's appeal, one more in a nagging stack of requests. Couldn't she see that they were already shorthanded? She'd already used up all the leave she had, how could she be asking for more?

Karyn was convinced that there was some way to get advanced leave. She had seen others do it. She would pay it back. She just needed help this one time. She was desperate for time off to get her mother settled into a nursing home. Meanwhile, Richard knew he was right. It was the supervisor's prerogative to allow leave or not, especially advanced leave.

When Karyn finally walked into Richard's office, they both reached for the dog-eared manual on his desk. They could read the policy from Human Resources. If the answer wasn't clear there, they would call to get clarification. A common understanding of the information was all that it took to find a way through their disagreement.

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Often, the key to resolving information disputes is to agree on which authorities or sources of data to use, or on the methods used for gathering the data.

HOW TO ADDRESS INFORMATION CONFLICTS

- ▶ Agree on a common source of information.
- ▶ Agree on a process for gathering data or facts.

Interests

Conflicts over interests and expectations generally take more effort to understand and resolve. To begin, what do I mean here by *interests*?¹

Most of the time, when people discover themselves in disagreement, they declare their positions—they make demands or stake claims. Each

of us presents our own answer to the conflict. You can begin by arguing who is right and who is wrong. And then you can move into how *right* you are and how *wrong* the other person is. You present your justifications for the demands you are making. Often those justifications are based on principles: “Because I am the boss.” “I deserve it.” “I need it more than you do.” “We did it your way last time.” “Mom always liked you best.” “Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

Interests are your underlying concerns, desires, and needs in a disagreement. Generally, interests are less apparent in a conflict than demands or proposed solutions. Therefore, in a contentious moment, first identify your own interests: What is important to you? What is it you are trying to accomplish? Why does this matter? And then try to understand the interests of the other person: What is important to him? Why? What is he trying to accomplish? What is he concerned about? When you can shift your discussion from arguing over positions—who is right and why—to each other’s interests, you can often discover solutions that are satisfactory to both.

HOW TO ADDRESS INTEREST CONFLICTS

- ▶ Focus on interests, not positions.
- ▶ Identify the underlying concerns and the needs of each person.
- ▶ Build solutions that meet the needs of everyone.

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For example, within a company, presumably everyone across all departments is working for the same goal. One and all are there to make and sell as many cardboard boxes as they can. Their goal is the same, but they have different interests in meeting that goal. The sales manager gets a commission based on the number of orders placed each quarter; so, her interest is in maximizing the number of boxes she sells. She may be frustrated by calls from customers waiting for delivery on promised orders.

The manager of operations is responsible for making the boxes to meet the orders coming in. He has to see that the machines are maintained and adequately staffed. He makes cer-

tain that someone at the end of the line checks the boxes for quality before they are shipped out. His bonus comes from keeping production costs (including overtime) low. His interests are in maintaining steady production, keeping the machinery running at an optimal rate, and promoting high staff morale and therefore high productivity. He is tired of being constantly nagged by Sales for greater production when Sales has sold beyond the capacity of the equipment.

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Yes, they both are in the business of making and selling boxes. They have mutual interests. For instance, they have a common interest in keeping the customers happy. But their separate interests sometimes collide. To resolve their differences, they need to recognize their mutual as well as their competing interests, rather than arguing over who is right or wrong. Ultimately, each of them is right. Selling more boxes is of primary importance to the company; and maintaining equipment and staff to ensure a quality product is also of primary importance to the company. They resolve their differences by creating an improved communication system between the two departments, so that operations is informed in a more timely way as customer orders are placed, and the sales manager can track production, including breakdowns, backups, and shipping dates.

Structural Conflicts

Structural conflicts generally involve limited resources, or structures that are beyond the control of the people in the conflict. In interest-based conflicts, solutions can be found through “expanding the pie”—finding solutions that meet the interests of both at the same time. In structural conflicts, however, the pie is fixed—the answers must be found within built-in limitations.

Here are some examples of structural conflicts:

- ▶ Three offices with windows, four staff members with the same level of responsibility. Who won't get a window office?

- ▶ Five people applied for the promotion, and there is only one opening.
- ▶ An administrative assistant reports to two bosses.
- ▶ Two positions have overlapping roles and responsibilities.
- ▶ Does the water in that river belong to the people at the headwaters, or to those whose land borders the river—on which side of the river?

To resolve structural conflicts, we must look to the ways that decisions are made. There are several ways to do this. For example, you can raise the matter to a more appropriate level of authority.

HOW TO ADDRESS STRUCTURAL CONFLICTS

- ▶ Raise the issue to an appropriate decision-making level.
- ▶ Establish fair and transparent decision-making processes.
- ▶ Reallocate ownership and control of decision making.

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As the group gathered for the meeting, the tension mounted. Those who arrived early for donuts and coffee wondered aloud if Carla would come. Ted was particularly anxious. Over the past several months, he and Carla had had a few bitter phone conversations and numerous hostile e-mail exchanges. In fact, everyone knew that these two division directors had frequent arguments with one another over policies and priorities.

Before the meeting, their boss explained to me that theirs was a personality conflict. Once they started talking about their differences in the meeting, the true conflict emerged: One division of the organization was assigned by region, the other was assigned by functional focus. When a food crisis erupted in Haiti, Ted, the regional director for the Caribbean, was clear that the decisions were his to make. After all, he knew the region and the resources available there. Carla, the director for food relief, was equally

clear that, since she had the technical expertise, she would be making the decisions.

In the meeting their boss finally heard the dispute (rather than relying on secondhand reports about each of them) and acknowledged, “When the Executive Committee created the reorganization, we didn’t take time to clarify who was in charge of what; we figured somebody could work that out later.” The solution for this structural conflict then was readily apparent. The boss, working with the rest of the Executive Committee, created a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities for these two positions.

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Another strategy is to establish fair and transparent decision-making processes. Define the criteria for decision making and inform the people involved as to how those criteria will be applied. When the available solutions are limited and the rewards—whether financial or other recognition—are significant, people become competitive, contentious, and suspicious of the decisions that are made. In particular, promotions can result in structural conflicts, as can performance awards or contract decisions. But fairness and transparency can be powerful forces in resolving structural conflicts.

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Dean filed an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaint against the agency. Four times over the last five years he had applied for promotions and had been denied. Surely, he reasoned, he had been denied because he was deaf. In a mediation, the human resources specialist carefully described step by step the agency’s decision-making process for promotions. (This was a written policy within the agency. However, because he was deaf, he was not aware of much of the informal communication within the office.) First, the hiring manager would create the job description. Then, someone with experience, but outside of the component, created from the job description a list of specific criteria for meeting the job requirements. Next, another person from

outside the agency reviewed each application, giving a numerical score according to each of the criteria. Based on the total scores, a hiring panel interviewed those most qualified and the selection was made.

As Dean processed all this information, his questions changed from “Why wasn’t I selected?” to “What can I do to improve my qualifications?” Once he understood the decision-making process, he dropped the EEO complaint.

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Additionally, you can reallocate ownership and control of decision making. Look for ways to turn decision making over to those who will be directly affected by the decision.

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The awards process within a local government office had employees buzzing like hornets. Those who didn’t receive awards were incensed. “Clearly,” they thought, “we have worked as hard as others, so why haven’t we been recognized?” Those who had received awards were embarrassed and defensive. At the awards ceremony designed to acknowledge effort and boost productivity, they did not know how to react. “Don’t call out my name!”

A committee was formed that included both those who had gotten awards and those who hadn’t; they would decide what to do with the program. After several meetings, the committee unanimously agreed to terminate the awards program. As they searched for a policy that would be perceived by all of the employees as fair and transparent, they could not find one. Because this decision was made by the employees themselves, others acknowledged that the decision was appropriate.

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Values

When we talk about values, we refer to the principles or qualities that we hold dear. As discussed in the previous chapter, values are shaped by

the identity groups that we belong to, whether ethnic, religious, regional, class, race, gender, or other. A few values might be considered universal, however the way they are interpreted, recognized, or demonstrated might be quite different across cultures.

Everyone you work with or know requires that certain basic human needs be met.² How these needs are satisfied varies widely around the globe, however. Whenever a conflict or disagreement puts these values at risk, the first task is to address the needs.

- ▶ Respect—a sense of worth, to be acknowledged as a valued human being
- ▶ Identity—a sense of self in relation to the outside world
- ▶ Security—safety, freedom from harm and the fear of harm, freedom from danger
- ▶ Belonging—the need to be accepted by others and to have strong personal ties with one’s family, friends, or identity group

Other values vary from individual to individual, or from community to community. These principles and qualities—what we believe in and what we care about—define who we are. Our values are not negotiable. If you are arguing about value differences, you will not change my mind and I will not change yours.

Consider This

- Consider the list of words below, and mark the five values that are most important to you.

Achievement	Creativity	Honesty
Advancement	Curiosity	Humor
Adventure	Effectiveness	Independence
Autonomy	Equality	Innovation
Balance	Excitement	Integrity
Beauty	Family	Knowledge
Belonging	Freedom	Learning
Challenge	Fun	Leisure
Competition	Growth	Loyalty
Cooperation	Health	Power

Prestige	Serenity	Teamwork
Productivity	Service	Variety
Quality	Social responsibility	Wealth
Relationships	Spirituality	Wisdom
Self-actualization	Strength	
Self-reliance	Structure	

Now, give the list to others you work with, and ask them to do the same. What values do you share? Which are different? This can be an eye-opening exercise with people whom you think you know very well.

Because our values are so closely tied to our identities, it is hard to imagine that others would not hold the same values that you do. This makes the territory of values conflicts particularly rough terrain. Perhaps you have been caught in endless arguments about politics or religion with co-workers or friends, or even within your own family. It is better to find a way around those differences rather than continuing to try convincing others of how right you are and how wrong they are.

HOW TO ADDRESS VALUES CONFLICTS

- ▶ Search for super-ordinate goals: the mission of the office or organization, the value of diversity in the workforce, etc.
- ▶ Allow parties to agree and to disagree.
- ▶ Build common loyalty.

Often in a values-based conflict, you can shift the focus to higher ground, where you both can agree on a bigger goal. The manager who can clearly state the mission of the organization, and within that mission, how the work of the office or department or team is key to meeting that mission, gives employees a clear sense of purpose around which to focus their own efforts. This is what it means to focus on super-ordinate goals—goals that are beyond the needs or interests of the individual.

How do value differences affect the workplace? Here are two examples that illustrate the challenges.

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Several years ago, I was cruising down an interstate behind a cute little red Jeep. Its license plate read “LV2PRT.” I was behind this vehicle for quite a while, so I had plenty of time to consider it. Did the plate say “Love to Party”? Maybe it said, “Live to Party”? In either case, obviously partying was really important to the driver of this car; he really valued having fun. And then I thought, *I have worked with someone a lot like him. He’s the one who comes into the office bleary-eyed on Monday morning, regaling everyone with wild tales of the Saturday night bash that rolled into Sunday morning.* After I heard his stories, I was sometimes tempted to step into lecture mode. “You are ruining your life. Can’t you see that this is no way to succeed?” Any time I was tempted to do this, though, I also remembered how others had tuned me out when they heard me launch into another sermon.

I concluded that there was nothing that I could say that would change his mind about the fun he was having and how important it was to him. What I could do was turn my own thinking around. Rather than trying to change his mind about his values, I could meet him on his own ground. Instead of trying to change his values, I could focus my efforts on the goals of the office and how his work supported that mission. I thought, *He needs to keep his job to be able to support his partying ways; that may be a way to motivate him to get the work done.* I also thought that we might also be able to tap into his energy to bring some fun to our own office. In short, it was better to put my efforts there than to try to change his mind about his values.

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The boss presented a big project to an employee: “We’ve got a new mandate coming down from headquarters. A whole new system to get up and running. It’s going to take a lot of extra work to get this done. Nights. Weekends. But if you do a good job, there is a real opportunity for you here. Maybe a promotion. And it’ll look great on your resume.” The employee reacted, “I don’t care about a promotion or building a resume. I am willing to give you a solid forty hours a week, but that is all I committed to. At

the end of the day, I am going home to my family. It's why I have this job."

For the boss, his value was that "career achievement is really important. I have spent my life working for it." For the employee, though, his value was, "I have this job so that I can take care of my family." Neither would convince the other about which value was the "correct" one. To find resolution, they first had to quit arguing over their differing values and consider how best to achieve the greater good.

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Relationships

On the right-hand side of the Figure 7-1 chart is the category "Relationships." These types of conflicts are about the history we have had together, how we communicate, the stereotypes we hold, and most important, the level of trust between us. All of those arrows point from relationships to the other sources of conflict because relationships affect everything else. If you and someone else have a positive relationship, the two of you can work through just about anything, from disagreements about information to different values. Often, because you have a positive working relationship, you want to preserve it. Working through the conflict is worth the energy and effort it may take.

The arrows in the figure point in both directions. That is, other types of conflicts also have an impact on relationship conflicts. This is particularly true of structural conflicts and values conflicts. In the story earlier in this chapter, of the boss with the regional directors, Ted and Carla, who barely spoke to one another anymore, the boss's explanation to me was quick and definitive: "They have a personality conflict." We dug further down to the roots of that conflict, and we discovered that there was a legitimate structural conflict underlying many of the arguments they had. Certainly the structural conflict created by overlapping responsibilities contributed to the relationship conflict.

Whenever someone tells me that they have a personality conflict, I begin sniffing around to see what else might be going on. The neat and

tidy explanation, “they have a personality conflict,” is often masking another source of conflict. It’s easy to declare the situation hopeless once the “personality conflict” diagnosis is made, but that diagnosis leaves little hope for improvement. People shrug their shoulders, “There is nothing you can do about it.”

Never underestimate the power of trust in a relationship. Trust is essential. If I am asking something of you—or you of me—we each need some assurance that the other will fulfill the commitment. Sometimes the level of trust needed is small. For instance, in the exchange of money for goods at the grocery store, you give your credit card to the cashier, trusting that the package of meat will be fresh when you get home. Driving down the highway, you count on the other car not to change lanes without signaling. With more important investments—our hearts, our livelihoods, our lives—the level of trust we need increases. In the workplace, we depend on others to perform consistently, to deliver on promises and commitments, in small ways and in significant ways, every day.

There is good news and bad news here. The good news is that, when people trust one another, they can work through virtually any conflict or difficulty. When mistakes are made, they give each other the benefit of the doubt. If I trust you, I will generally accept what you tell me—your excuses or explanations. I will give you information that you need in a timely way. Communication is fairly trouble-free. Information flows between people in an easy exchange.

The bad news is that, when there is no trust, communication becomes much more difficult. The simplest disagreements can become unsolvable. If I don’t trust you, I will doubt your motives and intentions. I will dismiss what you have to say, and I will withhold important information for fear of what you may do with it. When trust is gone, we cannot resolve the simplest issue. In a simple information dispute, I will not believe your data. I will be suspicious of what you have to say and why you are saying it. You will have the same reaction to statements. Figure 7-2 shows the interlocking relationships involved in conflict resolution.

The Effects of Distrust in the Workplace

You can see the lack of trust in many business and government offices. This lack of trust can paralyze business operations.

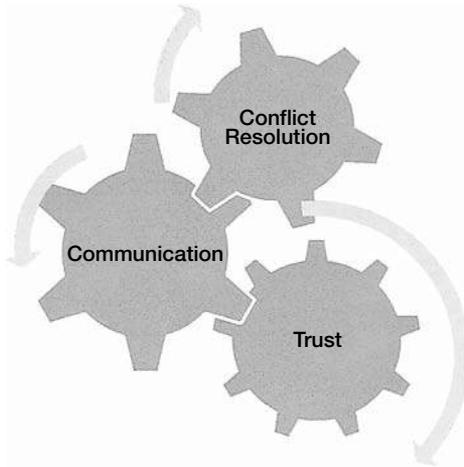


Figure 7-2. Trust, communication, and conflict resolution.

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Recently I returned to an office to mediate a disagreement between a supervisor and an employee. In July, the two had worked together easily, talking with and about one another in positive and productive ways. Each was clear about his responsibilities. Each counted on the other for support, information, and decisions. Then their relationship hit a wall. At the mediation in February, it was clear that things between them had soured. The employee had filed a grievance against the boss; his list of complaints was long. As I sat between them, I listened for clues as to what had changed.

In the employee's explanation, he told me, "My boss doesn't respect my decisions. He doesn't listen to me." I replied, "Tell me more about that."

"It really started two months ago. The boss overheard my conversation on the telephone with a board member. He didn't ask what was going on so I didn't have a chance to explain. He just announced loudly, 'I can't trust you,' and walked away. Since that moment, nothing I have done has been good enough for him." For a few minutes, the room was silent. Then they began to talk. The two of them could now confront the real challenge that they had: to work toward rebuilding the trust between them.

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Another employee described the challenge of the distrust that he experienced. When the boss went into a meeting with someone else, the employee's imagination would fill with the worst possible scenarios of the conversations going on inside the room. But when trust was reestablished, he let go of that anxiety, confident that whatever the discussion was, his own relationship with the boss was secure.

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The chief lesson I have learned in a long life is that the only way to make a man trustworthy is to trust him; and the surest way to make him untrustworthy is to distrust him and show your distrust.

—HENRY L. STIMSON

Time after time, when I am called in to assess an office dispute I find that distrust is at the heart of the problem. My job then becomes that of helping staff and management find ways to rebuild some rudimentary levels of trust so that the other issues can be addressed. On the other hand, sometimes I find terrific relationships of trust.

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Every morning Paula drives an extra thirty minutes to her job. Every afternoon she retraces that same drive, adding an extra hour to her work day. Every day! She has passed up equivalent jobs that are twenty miles closer to home. Why does she do this? Because, to hear her tell it, she has such a good boss, someone she can really trust.

When she talks about Tameka, she talks about trust—that each trusts the other. Paula trusts Tameka in no small part because Tameka trusts her. And that trust is so valuable to Paula that she will go to great lengths to maintain it. Here are some of the things Paula says about her boss:

“I don’t want to lose her trust in me. Tameka gives me assignments and trusts me to get them done.”

“If I tell her something in confidence, she keeps it confidential.”

“When we disagree, she listens. She may not agree with me in the end, but she listens. After she has made the decision, she gets back to me to tell me what she agrees with and what she doesn’t.”

“She looks out for everybody here. When someone needs help, Tameka looks for ways to provide it.”

When I hear Paula talk, I think of so many other bosses I know who dream of having the loyalty and commitment that Tameka gets from Paula. The foundation of that loyalty and commitment is trust.

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Consider This

- Use a survey like the one below to determine the level of trust within your own office.

1. My boss keeps promises and commitments.

<i>Strongly agree</i>					<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1	

2. Co-workers keep their promises and commitments.

<i>Strongly agree</i>					<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1	

3. My boss listens to me, even when he/she disagrees.

<i>Strongly agree</i>					<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1	

4. Co-workers listen to me, even when they disagree.

<i>Strongly agree</i>					<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1	

5. My boss communicates with me openly and honestly about significant information.

<i>Strongly agree</i>				<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1

6. My co-workers communicate with me openly and honestly about significant information.

<i>Strongly agree</i>				<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1

7. My boss demonstrates confidence in my skills and abilities.

<i>Strongly agree</i>				<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1

8. My co-workers demonstrate confidence in my skills and abilities.

<i>Strongly agree</i>				<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1

9. In our office, we look for ways to work together cooperatively.

<i>Strongly agree</i>				<i>Strongly disagree</i>
5	4	3	2	1

The Dynamics of Trust

In the beginning of a working relationship, most of us give others the benefit of the doubt. From there, trust builds slowly over time. For some of us, trust is easily given. Others take much longer before they will trust another.

We often think of trust as a savings account. Each time a commitment is made and kept, each time a promise or a confidence is maintained, or each time information is passed on in a timely way, managers are making deposits into the trust account. Each time a manager tips off

an employee about a change that is coming, or gives staff credit for the work that's been done, or trusts someone to accomplish a task, the manager adds to that account. The manager's actions tell employees that the boss is looking out for them, and that the boss values the work they do. The manager confirms that this relationship and the staff's contributions to it matter.

Every manager will need to draw upon that savings account, at one time or another. Inevitably, there are times when the manager will make a mistake. If the account is strong, when there are fumbles there is that buildup of trust to draw upon. Employees will forgive you and the relationship and the work will stay on track. They will continue to believe in your intent and your ability. Communication will flow as before. Staff can talk about those things over which you disagree. When they are concerned about some new direction, or have a difference of opinion, they feel it is safe to come to you to talk it over. Figure 7-3 portrays the trust-building mechanism and a subsequent loss of trust.

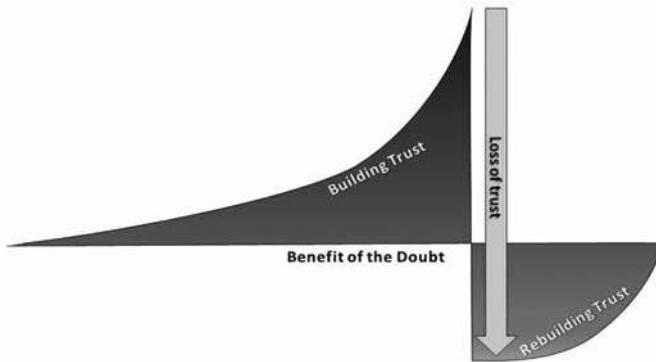


Figure 7-3. *The dynamics of trust.*

Trust is built up slowly, over time. It can be broken quickly, however. If an employee believes that you have been deliberately misleading or have withheld critical information, or have broken a confidence, the trust between you and that employee, or perhaps the whole staff, can plummet. But, as Figure 7-3 shows, it does not simply return to the level at which the relationship began; it slips below that line where one extended the benefit of the doubt to the boss. To return trust to that level requires energy, effort, and attention.

Trust can also be chipped away over time, not in one event, or one day or one month, but through a steady piling on of disappointments and broken commitments. When trust has been broken, communication is damaged and may shut down completely. As noted earlier, when communication tanks, trust sinks even lower. This downward spiral takes the working relationship with it down into the vortex. Productivity suffers. Informal communication doesn't happen—there's no more of the casual conversation as people pass one another in the hall or in the cafeteria. It's easier and more comfortable to just walk on by. People sit in meetings, withholding significant information. Phone calls are not returned. Messages are ignored. When trust is low, people hide behind e-mails. *Rather than talking to that person, the thinking goes, I'll just send her an e-mail, even if her cubicle is ten feet away.* (Chapter 16 has more on electronic communication.)

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The years I spent working with Jack and Howard were difficult ones for all of us. They had had a falling-out that they didn't repair. When Jack saw Howard coming down the hall, he would duck into my office to avoid any possibility of having to talk to Howard. Here, the simplest communication was lost and even basic information was not exchanged. In one instance, because they were not speaking, Jack didn't know that Howard would be out of the office for two weeks on vacation. It turned out that this information was critical. Jack was preparing a presentation, and Howard had vital information that Jack needed but could not include. They both looked worse for the omission.

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Trust is particularly challenging when a staff member is promoted from within the office to a supervisory or management position. Others can hold grudges about the decision. Additionally, sometimes there is uncertainty about previous relationships—or lack thereof—that creates distrust with the person who was promoted.

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Wanda was one of several staff members in a small office. Two other women in the office were her good friends. They

did everything together: they ate lunch together, took breaks together; they talked about their weekends, laughing and joking at each others' desks. Others may have felt left out, but then again they had their own circles of office friends.

Then Wanda was promoted to supervisor. She left the office on Thursday afternoon as one of the team. When she came to work on Friday she was the boss. Her circle of friends was unchanged, but suddenly the distrust among the rest of the group exploded. Others felt excluded. They watched for any sign of special treatment for Wanda's friends, keeping score and growing more and more resentful.

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In this situation, Wanda did not start off with the benefit of the doubt. Trust was way below that line, from the beginning of her job as supervisor. As a new supervisor, she didn't recognize how important rebuilding that trust would be to her ability to be successful in her new position. We can't blame her for that. Nobody ever taught her about that part of her job. She knew what the office was expected to do—the tasks to be completed, delivery deadlines, backlogs, and benchmarks. But she'd never been given the skills for the much more difficult job: managing the people she supervised. By the time her boss called for help, little work was getting done, and the distrust had become a significant barrier to any collaboration or cooperation.

The Manager's Challenge

For staff members with no supervisory responsibility, trust is important. With a healthy trust between co-workers, the inevitable conflicts that arise may be resolved before anyone describes the situation as a conflict. Disagreements are discussed and resolved without anyone ever thinking there was a "conflict" at all.

For managers juggling relationships in all directions, trust is even more important in resolving conflict. Sometimes I think of managers as "the knees" of the organization. The older I get, the more I realize the stress my knees take from the bottom up, as well as from the top down. The manager has relationships to maintain with direct reports, between staff, with bosses, and across departments. That manager is then bal-

ancing his or her own needs with the needs and demands of staff and with the expectations and requirements of higher-ups. Maintaining trust in all directions at the same time can sometimes feel impossible.

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Sasha was caught in that squeeze with her subordinate, Harold. She promised Harold that he would be getting a bigger space when the new office opened. At least, that is what Harold heard: “She said I’d get a bigger space when the build-out was finished!”

From Sasha’s point of view, she promised to try to get him bigger space. When Sasha took the request to her own boss, she felt she did everything possible to secure the space for Harold. The answer came back, “No. He’ll have to stay where he is now.”

Sasha was stuck. To Harold, it looked like she had broken a promise. But she needed to protect her boss, his authority, and her relationship there. As far as her boss was concerned, Sasha would have to take responsibility for this decision herself so that he could maintain a positive image with the department. So, what could Sasha do? At this point, she was caught between that proverbial rock and a hard place. What might she do differently next time?

To protect the trust between them, she could be very clear to her employee, Harold, that she would *recommend* a change. This often requires a clear inquiry: “Just to be sure we’re on the same page, tell me what you are expecting from me.” Then, Sasha could restate her intention to *advocate* for a change, and to clarify what she could not promise at that point. That is a promise she could keep while still protecting herself and her boss.

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Fixing relationship conflicts requires energy and attention over time: repairing and rebuilding trust, giving apologies and seeking forgiveness, managing anger, and maintaining a sense of humor. The next four chapters provide some tools that you can apply to these relationship conflicts.

Consider This

- ✓ Think of various disagreements or conflicts you have faced recently. Analyze them to determine their sources: Information? Interests? Structural? Values? Relationships?
- ✓ With that understanding, what tools can you use to address similar situations in the future?

Notes

1. Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1992).
2. John Burton, *Conflict Resolution and Prevention* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990).