



Managing Employee Conflict

The Case of Jennifer and Jonathan

By Tim Wright

She came into my office looking quite normal. Jennifer is a soft-spoken but confident director-level employee who manages client services. She has several direct reports and works under a group director, Jonathan. On this day, it appears Jonathan is the problem.

Jennifer told me she is sensitive about her appearance and Jonathan insulted her eating habits on a conference call with an important business partner. After the phone call ended, she confronted Jonathan and the discussion turned nuclear. “How did it end?” I asked uneasily. Jennifer responded coolly, *“I told him to get out of my office!”*

I assured Jennifer I would speak to Jonathan. It did not take long. Fifteen minutes later Jonathan walked into my office. “I am having a problem with Jennifer,” he complained. Jonathan appeared equally calm—at least on the surface.

Jonathan goes on to say Jennifer is not keeping him informed on the day-to-day details of the business. I countered by explaining Jennifer came to see me a few moments ago and said you created an awkward situation by joking about her eating habits on an important call with a business partner. Jonathan seemed surprised that I was already aware of the situation. He obviously didn’t know Jennifer visited my office. Too pragmatic to deny Jennifer’s claim, Jonathan quickly restated his position that she’s not keeping him in the loop.

It is important to know the facts before you act. When Jonathan left my office, I assessed the basic nature of the tension between them and began my intervention.

So often with employee conflicts like this, the real cause of the problem is unseen and below the surface. Jennifer believed she was being micromanaged and chose to distance herself from Jonathan instead of addressing his management style with him or HR.

Jonathan’s tendencies as a supervisor are to micromanage; however, he is accountable to the CEO for business results. Jennifer is not.

By keeping important details of the business from Jonathan, Jennifer is jeopardizing Jonathan’s relationship with the CEO. If you do not want Jonathan to drill down into your lane, I counseled Jennifer, you should keep him informed.

Jonathan’s passive-aggressive sarcasm is not suitable for a group director at his level of seniority and is against the values and policies of this organization.

The situation would not have escalated to HR if Jennifer and Jonathan's individual behavior patterns enabled them to see the perspective of others. The intervention reoriented their thinking.

I advised them to meet, share their honest points of view on their relationship, and clarify their working lanes and expectations. If Jonathan does not want Jennifer to distance herself from him, he must stop micromanaging, and let Jennifer do her job. If Jennifer wants the trust typically afforded the manager role, this comes with the price tag of accountability. Jennifer's role is to provide client service and to proactively keep her boss informed on the business progress. Jonathan's role is to communicate top-level strategy, delegate assignments and guide team performance.

On the surface the problems between them were poor communication, arguing and disagreements. *Control* is the essence of the problem below the surface. The preferred goal, particularly with senior managers, is to give them the guidance to resolve the problem on their own. Jonathan and Jennifer conferred and eventually achieved team harmony.

To increase team harmony, encourage weekly gatherings where team members can share project updates, individual stories, and alternate who shares their experiences. This is not solely a senior manager led exercise. It is not essential that the discussions are always work-related. The idea is to create regular opportunities for the entire team to be together and to take in stimuli at the same moment. It is called a sensory synch. These linking steps will increase harmony and make the team feel as if they are one, working together and towards a common goal.

"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."

—Benjamin Franklin

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