

And in this corner... A 'Colleagial' SuperSlam

By Cheryl Crumb

My 21-year old son, Kellen, is a wrestling fanatic. He can tell you the stats of every single man, woman or behemoth who has fought in a wrestling ring. He can recite and demonstrate (usually in the kitchen with his mum as the victim) the moves that will transform a 375-pound human being into a mass of jello.

The televised SuperSlams have taught the observer world that winners are carried away triumphantly on the shoulders of admirers while losers are booed, ridiculed and left to deteriorate alone. It makes exciting entertainment, but it doesn't prepare young people for the conflicts that could occur in the job arena.

What's a conflict? Any situation where people disagree. Conventional managers, groomed in the era of obedience, conformity and respect for authority, brooked little dissension among the ranks. The mantra was "get along...play nice.... don't make waves". Consider that this strategy is doomed to repeat the sins and omissions of the past. Without the introduction of new ideas, viewpoints, we'll only be as good as we were. Look at the World of 2003...the turbulence of change, the shifting cultural demographics, and the realization that workers are more than "Obedience Machines" guarantee that conflict is here to stay. A perfect workday isn't a smattering of superficial, polite responses but the synergy created when different voices resonate to give birth to new ideas.

An example of an organizational conflict: someone in the sales department has failed to inform the distribution department that there's a blowout sale on the first Sunday of the month. Customers storm in eager to buy product, and none is available at the location. Customers take it

out on the retail staff, salespeople yell at shippers, and shippers resentfully claim it's not their fault since no one told them. Who's right? Does it matter?

This situation could wind up in figurative fistcuffs if combatants righteously pushed their own positions. If so, the loudest, strongest, or most senior will likely walk away victorious. The aftermath: a tainted environment where people avoid each other, sabotage tasks, or pretend sincerity and backstab. Not a healthy path when creative energy is required to be customer-focused in these competitive times.

There are always more than two solutions (my way, your way). Most of the time, we're just too closed, pushy or lazy to look for other possibilities. Collaboration, known as win/win, is generally the best strategy in any collegial conflict situation, but it's the most difficult to accomplish. Why is it the best? It allows alternatives to flourish and enhances buy-in from all individuals. Why is it difficult? People need to be willing to want to resolve the conflict, they must explore the root issues rather than symptoms, and they must be willing to put themselves in the shoes of their fight partners. In other words, they must be willing to empathize.

So, the million-dollar question is "how can we learn to collaborate?". A six-step approach will guide us:

Let's test this process on our sales and distribution warpath scenario where arrows are flying in all directions. What if the conversation went this way...

Step 1 - Define the conflict - Represent your perspective and your assessment of the other person's viewpoint.

"We're in a real mess right now. We have customers who want product and we don't have it to give them. The salespeople on the floor are facing angry customers. The people in your department feel mistreated because nobody informed them about the sale. We need to work together to find a way to prevent this from every happening again."

Step 2 - Understand the situation - Asking who/what/where/when/why/how questions. Listen to the responses non defensively.

"We need to better understand this. Who else is being affected by this? What specifically are the concerns from people in your department? Where did this start? Has this ever happened before? What do you think contributed to this happening?"

Step 3 - Create alternatives - Consider actions to minimize the current situation as well as preventions so it doesn't happen again.

"Let's brainstorm some action we might take right now to contain this. Let's not judge yet, but get them all out on the table. Then we can look at what we might do in the future so that this doesn't happen again."

Step 4 - Project the results of each alternative - Speculate on what the future might look like if that action were taken.

"What if we did this right now? What might happen? What if we did that? What else might we have to do? How might that affect...?"

Step 5 - Select and agree on the best solution

"We've come up with some pretty good ideas to take care of the immediate situation and to prevent it from reoccurring. Let's weigh the advantages and risks of each action. Looks like we have to create a communication process that will contain these elements...."

Step 6 - Implement and evaluate "Let's get together again at the end of the day to see whether our containment plan worked. What would be a good time to discuss the prevention plans with members from all departments. Let's talk about how we should do that."

The result: Two people who could have been at each other's throats realize the suffering of the other, and are willing to let go of their righteousness to develop a more positive future.

It's possible. It's difficult. It is essential in the world we now live in. Our ability to manage conflicts is not just a "nice to have" in the 21st century...it's a core competency.

