

# Collaborative innovation helps to deal with conflict in the workplace

BY BETTY DOO

What is one of the greatest obstacles to the success of a young technology company? Is it a lack of business or technological expertise? A shortage of creative talent? These qualities are in abundance in the New England tech community. There are many talented, smart and hard-working technical experts willing to commit to achieve the goals of a new company.

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Perhaps a greater obstacle to a company's success is the ability of these people to get along with one another. That's right — those things we learned back in kindergarten, if not attended to, can get us into serious trouble. This occurs, for example, when we see a stubborn refusal to cooperate or give up control, which is essential for collaborating creatively to achieve business results.

Consider this scenario: A team of business-savvy engineers is dedicated to tak-

ing their innovative state-of-the-art product to market. Everyone is working 24-7. They are a group of talented and committed professionals with an impressive background of degrees, experience and subject matter expertise. The clock ticks, the pressure is on; this is when the real challenges come into play.

While attending a team meeting, you observe power struggles. You see that one or two workers dominate the discussion while others are silent. There are team members rolling their eyes or giving surreptitious looks across the room. Tempers begin to flare. There is no clear strategy for moving forward. The meeting is adjourned with little accomplished.

We have all experienced this situation at one time or another. The real problem comes in, however, when it is happening on an ongoing basis. There is a great potential for projects to become derailed. And if this is occurring at the level of the senior team, the company is in trouble. They may get through this phase, but there will be many more challenges to come.

No amount of funding, technical genius or business know-how is going to help this company achieve its goals. Furthermore, investors are closely scrutinizing the management teams of the companies they invest in today, knowing that poor outcomes occur when there are continual unresolved disagreements and a lack of strategic alignment.

If you are concerned about the level of conflict in your company, consider these strategies:

**1. Openly address and resolve disputes as they occur.** Conflicts ignored will generally not go away but may lead to additional insidious problems. Disagreements are not negative for an organization; on the contrary, they are an important aspect of a company's success. The problem is not the existence of

discord but in how it is managed.

**2. Help employees recognize personal differences in managing conflict.** A team usually has some members who are uncomfortable with open conflict, others who are highly argumentative and some in between. Recognizing these differences can help employees take responsibility and prevent conflicts from escalating to a more serious level.

**3. Provide education for managers in dealing with workplace conflict.** Conflict resolution strategies are effective. Most managers are not prepared for dealing with these situations, particularly in high tech, where recruiting and training emphasis is on technical expertise rather than people management.

**4. Implement an organizationwide analysis of conflict.** Interpersonal disputes in a company are frequently the tip of the iceberg; they generally reflect more substantive process or structural problems such as role confusion, work overload, weak management structure or a fear-based organizational culture that does not tolerate diversity or open expression of opinions.

The costs of ignoring workplace conflicts are high, and they include reduced productivity, loss of valued employees, derailed or delayed projects, potential litigation or, if conflicts escalate, violence.

Alternatively, when talented, committed professionals transcend interpersonal discord, there is a renewed sense of trust, engagement and optimism. The results are collaborative risk-taking and innovative solutions, which are distinct competitive advantages for any technology company today.

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