

# Talking It Out is the Path of Peace

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“Doug, I need some peacemaking help right now!” John said over the telephone. John was the CEO of a software development company employing 50 people.

“What’s the situation?” I asked.

“My Chief Information Officer and my Marketing Manager are not speaking to each other. The CIO is fine, but the Marketing Manager is really angry,” John said. “I’ve tried to get it worked out, but you really need to step in.”

“Are both of your people willing to speak with me?” I asked.

“Yes. They both respect you and think you might be able to help.”

“Good. When do you want me over?” We set up a time and ended the call.

At the appointed hour, I entered a company conference room and introduced myself to the managers. I asked if they knew who I was and what my presence was all about. They knew who I was and what I was there to help with. I laid out some ground rules and explained how I wanted to proceed. When they concurred, we started.

“Who wants to start by giving us a perspective?” I asked. Mary, the Marketing Manager, said, “I’ll start.”

“Good,” I said. “Tom, listen carefully as I will want you to summarize Mary’s perspective.”

The story concerned the creation and publication of short biographies to be used in the company marketing materials. Mary had asked Tom, the Chief Information Officer, to hold off publishing several employee biographies on the website. Tom said he would do so and wait for an update from her. Several months later, under pressure from the senior vice president to get the biographies up on the site, Tom used what he had from Mary.

When Mary discovered what happened, she was furious. She went to the Human Resources Manager to complain. The HR Manager told her not to talk to Tom. The HR Manager said he would talk to Tom.

The HR Manager met with Tom, found out what happened, and told Tom to avoid Mary and let her cool down some. Mary, not hearing anything further, just got angrier. She felt especially disrespected because Tom, formerly a good friend, seemed to be avoiding her.

“And that’s where we are today,” Mary finished. Tom’s perspective tracked Mary’s perspective. He looked at her and explained that he was under pressure to get the website complete. Further,

he had completely forgotten about his promise not to use the material without updating her. He apologized for that error. He also explained that he was put off by the HR Manager's direction to avoid Mary, but followed the suggestion. "I would have preferred to talk to you directly, but was told not to," he said.

As the stories unfolded, the classic nature of the conflict became clear to all of us. Apparently fearful of an emotional confrontation, the HR Manager separated Tom and Mary. The result had the opposite of the intended effect—escalation instead of peace.

When Tom and Mary saw the entire picture, they laughed ruefully. Peace and their friendship were quickly restored. They agreed that having lunch together would be the fastest way for the rest of the company to see that the issue was behind them.

The lesson they and John, the CEO, learned was that avoiding conflict by separating people is not a good solution. Avoidance usually creates further misunderstanding, a sense of disrespect, and further anger.

Conflict in any situation creates anxiety and fear. We fear loss of control, unpleasant emotional outbursts, and perhaps even violence in extreme situations. Our natural inclination is to reduce the anxiety and eliminate the fear by separating the parties in conflict. If they don't talk to each other, the conflict seems to go away. Of course, we all know that the conflict does not go away, but usually gets worse. Asking parties to "forgive and forget" or avoid the dispute simply pushes it under the surface. It will erupt somewhere else.

The secret to true peace in these situations is in creating a space where the employees in conflict can have a safe, protected, and well-moderated conversation about the problem. The person doing the moderation should have some training in basic peacemaking principles and be able to withstand some emotional outbursts calmly. When we provided a calm, balanced space for Tom and Mary to talk with one another, the entire problem took 20 minutes to resolve. Not all company conflicts will be as easy, but putting people face to face is usually the most efficient path to peace.