

WORK IT RIGHT! - #6
Improving Relationships On and Off the Job

by Gini Graham Scott

DON'T FIGHT – FIND OUT!

Sometimes office fights – much like any fights – can start with deeply held opposing opinions about how things are or should be, turning relationships into warring camps, each thinking the other is myopic. Then, relationships can further deteriorate. Yet, such heartfelt views are often based on wrong assumptions, premises, and beliefs – so people may not be that far apart, once these errors are revealed.

That's what happened in one office lunch room when Sonia described a new product she heard about – Post-Its with English and Spanish lines of copy about how to clean a house. A non-Spanish speaking employer could post the instructions on a wall or the refrigerator to tell a non-English Spanish-speaking employee what to do. There were translations for phrases like “Scrub the toilet” and “Wash the floors.”

As Sonia described the Post-Its, she became increasingly angry, calling it “racist and offensive.” She stated that the product supported the worst stereotypes of “dumb and stupid Mexicans” and derided the arrogance of rich employers who would buy such a product, because “they don't want to talk to their help.” Worse, they probably underpaid their employees, considering them lowly servants, and this product demeaned them even more. Soon several other employees agreed with her point of view.

But then another employee, Harriet, spoke up and said she thought the product would be helpful and not demeaning. Instead, she thought the Post-Its would help an

employer explain what he or she wanted, describing how her own team of monthly housekeepers was led by a woman who spoke English and Spanish, who came with one or two women from Mexico or Central America who spoke only Spanish. Then, another employee came to her support, saying that he didn't think it was demeaning to have someone clean a house. "It's like hiring any service. It's like bringing in someone to fix my computer if it breaks down."

And so the argument went on, one side stressing the practicality of the product; the others accusing the them of being insensitive and biased. And relationships at work were very strained for awhile due to the dispute.

But ironically, none of these employees was Hispanic and had no idea how Hispanic Spanish-speaking housekeepers might feel. Instead, the employees each based their argument on assumptions about other people's feelings and intentions.

Such assumptions can lead to mistakes and conflicts, especially in a multi-cultural environment, where people come from many different perspectives. Thus, rather than imagining how people might react to some situation, ask to find out.

That's what Harriet did a few weeks later, when her Russian housekeeper, Elva, who was married to a man from El Salvador, arrived with two Spanish-speaking women. Harriet described the dispute at work to Elva, who said she didn't find the notes offensive. Then Elva translated Harriet's question into Spanish and asked her employees, who responded in Spanish, with Elva translating their answers for Harriet. And it turned out they liked the Post-It idea. They found it helpful and not insulting, since, as Elva explained their views. "They would like to know what their employer

wants them to do.” So Harriet found her answer by asking rather than relying on assumptions of what her housekeepers might think and feel.

Likewise, if you’re in a situation where people have opinions about what others think and believe, ask yourself whether they really know – or whether you do yourself. Or is the disagreement fueled by untested premises, assumptions, and beliefs about the facts? If so, find out the facts, so your opinion will be based on what you know. And often when everyone has the facts, the source of disagreement can wither away. In fact, everyone may turn out to share similar opinions, once they each know what’s really so.

Today’s Take-Aways:

- If you’re fighting about the facts, sometimes that’s because you and your opponents don’t know what the facts really are.
- Don’t just imagine or assume what the facts must be; find out when you don’t know or aren’t sure.
- Sometimes the more firmly people hold opinions, the less they really know; if so, seek to reverse the equation by providing them with the facts.

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