

The Sand Paper

Summer 2011



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Navigating the Ocean of Emotion

by Dr. Gretchen Stein, President & CEO of The Sand Creek Group.

This quarter's newsletter deals with some of the painful aspects of human behavior and how to improve your awareness of situations for a better outcome. The four topics addressed in this issue of The Sand Paper are performing under high stress, feeling excluded by others at work, grieving the death of a co-worker, and resolving conflict in a fair manner.

When we go to work, we simply cannot leave our emotions at the door and enter as productive robots. We come to work with our joy, our enthusiasm, and our sense of humor. We also come

with our capability to feel overworked, left out, deeply sad, or angry. How we deal with our ocean of emotions and how we can be more sensitive to the hurts of others is vitally important to our health and wellbeing and the morale of our work teams.

Please take a few moments to read this issue and, if the suggestions seem right, consider following some of them.

If there is a topic you would like to see addressed in these pages, please email us with your suggestions. We



strive to create a quarterly newsletter that informs and offers a new or different way to think about life and life at work.

I also invite you to call your employee assistance program if you or your dependents need help with relationship issues, chemical health, financial concerns, or other problems in living. All contact information appears on the back of this publication.

For Managers & Supervisors: It's Hard to Do All of It Well

by Diane Johnson, MSW, LISW, CEAP

At any given time managers and supervisors are expected to do these five tasks equally well:

1. Manage employee performance
2. Manage the flow of information
3. Manage their own work
4. Manage team dynamics
5. Manage their own personal reactions

In the best of circumstances, there are few of us who have the skill set to do all of these things well. To do them all at the same time and under high stress makes the tasks even more daunting. As a result, one of the things that starts to happen is we tend to avoid the management tasks we are less comfortable with or feel less competent addressing. It can be a conscious or unconscious decision, and it can start out as temporary neglect of one of these tasks. If we do actually get back to the task, it becomes part of the normal ebb and flow of leadership. If we consistently put one of these tasks on the back-burner, we start to see consequences.

Many supervisors and managers often identify working harder than ever and yet feeling less effective. When you believe you are at capacity, it can be hard to see what needs to be done differently or know where to focus your attention. We all have a default mode when we are stressed. It is the place we go to when we are trying to cope and it is often the place in which we are most comfortable. What this means is that if we are comfortable doing our own work, we may be inclined to shut our door, focus on the pile of work on the desk, and ignore the conflict between two employees. It is a natural response and yet it sometimes catches up with us.

It can be helpful to ask yourself what your most comfortable tasks are and what goes to the back burner. It sometimes allows a supervisor to identify what they may have been neglecting and refocus their efforts. If you would like to talk about how you are doing juggling all of these tasks or how to develop further skills, give us a call at Sand Creek.



SAND CREEK GROUP, LTD.
RESOURCES WITHOUT BARRIERS

Surprise Yourself & Someone Else!

by Diane Johnson, MSW, LISW, CEAP

At some point in life, we probably all feel like an outsider. It may be when we are the only person of our gender in a room, it might be looking around and not seeing anyone with our skin color, it might be an age issue of feeling invisible as one's hair gets gray and the world is focused on youth. Or it could be a holiday celebration and we have no where to go, being single on Valentine's Day, not having a computer in an age of Wi-Fi or not liking to share personal information in an environment at work where there are few boundaries.

The nature of individuals coming together with similarities or feeling distance based on differences seems to have been happening for as long as people have been spending time in common space. Most of us have probably felt the benefits of belonging as well as the hurt or discomfort of not feeling included. As individuals experience higher cumulative stress at work and feel the ever dwindling commodity of time, it becomes easier and easier to focus on one's own needs, the elements of day to day tasks, and survival. What that can mean is we may forget about the extra effort of functioning as a team member with an attitude of inclusivity.

Excluding others is often not intentional. Occasionally it may be, but one of the effects of too much stress, less opportunity to connect with our colleagues, and the assumptions we make is that we may be

contributing to a work culture that is more divisive and demoralizing than is necessary. When there is so much about the pace of our work and the expectations for fast turn-around times that we do not have control over, it can be refreshing and energizing to focus on the elements that we do have control over. One element of control is how we choose to treat one another in our workplace.

In some writings on happiness and lifting one's mood, one of the suggestions is that when there is a person we find irritating or want to avoid, we need to make a point of doing something thoughtful for that person and we will see a positive impact on our own attitude and mood. Though we may not always have the energy or initiative to extend ourselves to someone, the premise is a good one. It is the idea that we all want to feel valued, included, and respected. Small gestures toward a colleague can go a long way toward overall morale as well as improving our own attitude.

The next time you feel like ignoring a colleague, talking about someone negatively, or excluding an individual when you all go to lunch, consider experimenting with different behavior. Offer a positive or inclusive gesture and notice what the impact is on you as well as the mood in your office.



“We all want to feel valued, included, and respected.”



How to Fight Right

You may think that the perfect couple never has conflict. First of all, that is impossible. Secondly, healthy conflict and disagreement are crucial to a long-term marriage or relationship.

It may sound crazy, but Dr. John Gottman, a University of Washington marriage counselor and researcher, says that arguments and disputes do not have to drive couples apart—it is *how* you argue that makes the difference. Remember that extraordinary skills are not needed to settle conflicts in a way that makes both partners feel good.

Styles

Some couples may yell at each other when they have a disagreement. Other couples may avoid confrontations as much as possible. There are also couples who seem to have a keen ability to listen and understand each other—even in conflict.

According to Dr. Gottman, couples using these three styles of communication (yelling, avoiding, or listening) all have equal chances of staying together. How could that be? It seems impossible that both the yellers and the avoiders could have stable relationships, yet all three types of couples have several things in common.

- They stop fights before the conflicts escalate out of control.
- They do not completely avoid dealing with a tough problem before it gets out of hand.
- They continue to respect each other despite troublesome issues.

Limited Escalation

When couples fight, they know when to stop, when to soften their voices, and when to change the course of an

argument. Neither partner gets into a pattern of saying nasty things about the other partner that he or she later regrets. They may complain about an issue, but they do not engage in character insults intended to psychologically abuse each other. The couple stops the process of negatively responding back and forth before hurtful things are said.

One group of researchers discovered that out-of-control arguments resulted in partners saying things that threatened "the very lifeblood of their marriage." The nasty remarks may not even truly reveal how they feel, but they are trying to hurt each other in a moment of intense emotion. This may come in the form of hostile name-calling, put-downs, hostile humor, mockery, or any other type of demeaning behavior.

How can escalation be short-circuited? One of the partners must choose to back off by changing his or her tone of voice and saying something to break the negative cycle. The partner may start a sentence with "I feel....," instead of "You are..."

This sudden change of behavior is powerful. It acknowledges personal feelings and opens the door to hearing the other partner's point of view. This approach can often break the tension.

No Hide and Seek

Some couples may avoid dealing with certain troublesome issues. This is their style and they both feel comfortable with it. In other couple relationships, if one partner often brings up issues (the pursuer) and the other partner withdraws (the withdrawer) or avoids the situation, there is trouble. The more one partner pursues, the more the other partner withdraws. In turn, the pursuer pushes harder and the

withdrawer may leave or become quiet, or easily agree to stop the conversation.

Studies have shown that although withdrawers may not be involved verbally, their internal body reactions show increased pulse rates when troublesome issues surface. They are engaged on a nonverbal level.

How do you combat a hide-and-seek pattern? A couple needs to recognize that the actions of one partner impacts the actions of the other. They need to recognize their interdependence and think about more constructive approaches. The person who withdraws could ask for time to think, but agree to a specific time to talk about the issue later. The person who pursues may take the hint and back off.

Respect

Successful couples disagree, but they still respect each other. If a concern is raised, one partner may disagree, but will still respect the concern and listen to the other partner's point of view. Neither person immediately becomes defensive about the issue, and neither immediately denies responsibility for the problem.

Furthermore, neither person tries to read the mind of the other person. Researchers have found that a person who tries to guess what is on the other person's mind generally has more negative interpretations of the other person's motives than is actually true.

How do you deal with negative interpretations? It starts with your negative thoughts, and it takes hard work to question these inner thoughts. Ask yourself the following questions: "Am I being too hard on my partner? Am I being unfair when

(Continued on page 4)

How to Fight Right *(continued from page 3.)*

I don't really know what my partner is thinking? What are my reasons for continuing this negative mind-reading?"

Think about your answers to these questions, and begin a deliberate process to think more positively. Stop yourself when you begin to focus only on negative things about your partner.

Willingness to Change

Negative verbal and nonverbal patterns are hard on relationships. They can lead to feelings of frustrated loneliness and isolation, as real intimacy and a sense of connection fade away. But there is hope. A couple can change these



damaging patterns by taking the time and effort to explore new ways of interacting.

It is impossible to not communicate. It is regular everyday conversation that sets the emotional climate between two people. Communication involves

not only the actual words that are spoken, but how the message is said, when it is said, and what the speaker is doing as the message is spoken. Nonverbal messages, such as vocal tone, pitch and loudness, facial expressions, and body movements, are also important to communication.

Source: Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service. (1997, January). CoupleTalk: Enhancing your relationship. Retrieved May 18, 2011, from the Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Web site: <http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/>

What is Unique about Grief in the Workplace

by Diane Johnson, MSW, LISW, CEAP

Many of us, at some point in our work life, may experience the death of a co-worker. It may come with warning such as news of a terminal illness or it may be a sudden death through an accident, suicide, or heart attack. When it occurs, the experience can be extremely disorienting and our response can catch us off guard.

One reason for this is that there are some unique elements to experiencing grief in the workplace, and there are elements of grief that we are more accustomed to in our personal life than our work life. For example, acute shock, sadness, and tears can feel very unfamiliar in our work role. Also, as many people know, we may see our coworkers on a much more frequent basis than some of our closest friends. This then means that we are losing someone who we may have seen or spoken with on a routine basis every week and we will have daily reminders of their absence. Another unique aspect is that when we grieve in our personal life, we often try to carve out time and space to have those feelings. At work the challenge is that we have those same feelings but the demands of the work place continue. No matter how valued or loved a colleague may be, the work needs keep occurring in spite of a loss. This particular aspect can create a range of reactions including anger and frustration that there isn't more of an opportunity to stop the wheels of work and experience the loss of a coworker. At the same time our family isn't experiencing the same loss and so our support may be occurring more in the workplace.

Also, as we age our grief becomes cumulative so we may be surprised by the intensity of our feelings when a coworker dies. It may be genuine feelings about the loss of the person and it also may be an accumulation of other losses that have occurred that are re-triggered with the death of a coworker.

One positive development that has evolved in the workplace is the recognition that there can be a high value in creating an opportunity for a work group to come together, learn about the unique aspects of a death at work, and also talk about what they are experiencing. Sand Creek has provided this service for work teams for several years. Part of what is positive about providing a grief group is that employees have the opportunity to support one another directly, the challenges of grieving at work are discussed openly, and expectations of what the future may bring are identified. Examples of what the future may bring include the tension around cleaning out an employee's work space, decisions about hiring someone new, what to say when someone calls and asks for the employee, etc.

If there is not the opportunity to offer a grief group, a supervisor or manager may still find it useful to call Sand Creek and consult about the employee death and ideas for supporting the team in the immediate and in the future.

Dear Sandy,

I am frustrated because I have plenty of vacation time, and I would like to take days off this summer to travel, be with family and friends, or just RELAX. I am so overwhelmed with my work, though, that it seems impossible to be gone. As it is, I am stressed out by the amount of work that I have in front of me. I have been working longer hours for weeks and I still don't

return calls or e-mails very quickly. I am always anxious about dropping the ball. I can't imagine what my e-mail inbox would be like if I take a week off. The most that I have taken for the last few years are 4-day weekends. Since my co-worker quit 18 months ago and we didn't fill his position, it has been exhausting trying to keep up and learn his tasks also. I am

getting more and more resentful of work and am afraid that I am going to blow up the next time I am asked to take on something new. I can't afford to leave my job but can't keep this up. Do you have any suggestions that are realistic?

Signed,

Burned Out



Send your inquiries for Sandy to info@sandcreekeap.com.

We may not be able to publish all inquiries, but all will be responded to via email. Thank you.

Dear Burned Out,

It sounds like you have been incredibly committed to making things continue to work well since your co-worker left. One of the things that is happening for many employees is that they have kicked in to high gear to fill the gaps of fewer employees or new assignments but no new staff being added. It seems to be OK in the short run but many employees, like you, are realizing that they cannot sustain the pace they have set and are working harder but feeling less satisfaction with their work. It is a very short step to feeling irritable, resentful, and even victimized.

There is good news and there is hard news about this. The good news is that you are realizing you can't or aren't able to sustain your pace and you know you need time to rejuvenate and it needs to be more than periodic 4 day weekends. The other good news is that you have time available to you if you want to take it. The hard news is

that there is no easy transition in figuring this out. Part of this is accepting that you now may always need to live with feeling behind in your work, and one part is learning to live with that anxiety or discomfort about it. It is a new "normal" for a lot of people in the workplace to try and figure this out. I encourage you to look around and see if there is someone in your workplace who manages to take vacations but you still consider them to be a good employee. Talk with them and ask what they are doing to make it work. Part of doing more with less for many of us is to shift expectations that we put on ourselves. I suggest a candid conversation with your supervisor about your concerns and see if they can offer any help in coming up with a plan for you to experiment and to be gone for a week.

The more you keep doing what you are doing and feeling like you don't have options, it is pretty much

guaranteed that you will continue to feel worse and also be less productive. The reality is that each of us needs some down time to keep ourselves going and you don't need to feel badly about it or apologize for it. The next steps are to expand how you think about taking time, stop telling yourself that you can't do it, talk with your supervisor to figure out how to do it, and get support in managing your anxiety about it. The more burned out we get, the less we can imagine other options. That is why having support becomes really important. Good luck and it is so important that you experiment with making this happen.

Sandy

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About Our Organization

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offers free, confidential assessment, short-term counseling, referral, and follow up. Professional counselors are experienced in helping people identify and find solutions to personal issues such as:

- Relationships
- Parent/Child Issues
- Substance Abuse
- Gambling
- Loss and Grief
- Financial Concerns
- Depression
- Job Stress
- Childcare or Eldercare
- And Other Life Concerns

Sand Creek EAP is your program. It's completely confidential, provided at no cost to you, and available to both you and your household family members. When you need help with personal concerns, we're the place to turn.

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