
LEARNING WORKS FOR ALL OF US

*"a networking newsletter from the office of
LearningWorks Enterprises Inc., www.learning-works.ca"*

Fall 2003

Volume 2 No. 4

The Role of the Witness in Resolving Conflict

Recently Jane attended a retreat for colleagues in the business of conflict resolution training, mediation and general harmony making. Four topics were discussed in round table format. All centred on the congruency of skills learning and emotional connection with those skills. The underlying question was "How are we best supporting our students, clients, employees to truly integrate their learning so that they can make a difference in their world?" One particular discussion centred on the challenge of training and supporting the witness in conflict situations.

Most if not all of our training centres on how to resolve a first party conflict between a person and two or more people be it colleague, boss, friend or family member. Little is mentioned about the role of the witness, onlooker, third party in conflict. We have all heard stories of onlookers feeling at best unempowered and fearful, at worst apathetic. "It's not my problem" or "I can't do anything about it anyway" are not so infrequent reactions. Tragic media reports of a young woman's cry for help being ignored or teenagers watching whilst their group members kick another to death are known to any one picking up a newspaper.

So what is missing? Why is it that there is so much hesitancy or reluctance to take a stand to "do the right thing?" Fear of reprisal is an obvious thought, particularly in terms of a large group reaction. This could also be said about organizational dynamics. It is "safer" to do nothing, gripe with another colleague or report to the management with the hopes that they would intervene. But what about apathy? Fear of getting involved, not knowing what to do, who to call or even a fear of nothing changing or not being taken seriously may all be barriers to being an involved third party.

William Uhry, in his book *"The Third Side"* poses the theory that the third party creates a container for the conflict. A circle of teenagers watching a fight creates the container or the arena for that fight. Neighbours listening inactive whilst a woman screams are creating a container for the violence, employees or management who ignore or put up with conflict in the workplace create a container for that conflict. Few of us realise that

by doing nothing we are making a choice to do something. And the conflict continues. Not doing anything is a decision. There is no such thing as not being involved. As practitioners in the field it is important to make that message clear.

Uhry also likens the witness to an immune system. When it is healthy and strong it prevents the virus from spreading, when weak the virus runs rampage. Our role is to provide the nutrients, to create a strong immune system. To inform the witness in us all of our role, to learn about our own fears around conflict, to create a tool box of skills to use in conflict situations. And, most of all, to encourage a culture in the organizations that we work in of active participation of all employees in resolving conflicts as they arise.

Our questions then to all of our readers are what do you think is the missing link here? How can we encourage and foster a greater accountability in our role as witness? How could you see that change the dynamic of the organizations in which you work? Please mull over this rather “heavy” subject and bring your thoughts to our December breakfast meeting when Jane will lead the discussion.

LearningWorks’ Lowdown

After a hot, restful summer we are delighted to give a big welcome to our new partner, Anastasia Humenuk. Anastasia comes to us with an extensive HR background in Training, Facilitation and Leadership Development and is also a dynamic entrepreneur. Come and hear her speak on “Open Space” as an Organizational Development Tool at our September Breakfast Meeting.

At our June Breakfast Meeting, we were delighted to have Judy Baldwin and Wendy Bradley with us. A great time was shared discussing the challenges and delights of working in this communications industry.

Books shared were:

- *Management of the Absurd* by Richard Farson
- *The End of Management* by Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith
- *Mediating Dangerously* by Kenneth Cloke

We would like to create some structure and form to our Breakfast Meetings and would welcome ideas, thoughts and contributions. What would you like to share with our community?

Next Breakfast Meeting

For those of you in the Vancouver area, please join us for our next breakfast meeting to hear Anastasia Humenuk talk about "Open Space" as an Organizational Development Tool.

Time: 8:00 a.m.

Date: September 30, 2003

Place: LearningWorks
Suite 205 – 1110 Hamilton Street
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RSVP: LearningWorks at 604-669-6757 by September 26 th



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