

Toxic Cliques

By

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David Wilson reveals sensible strategies for surviving workplace warfare.

The antagonism starts at high school. Which peer group were you in? Were you a stoner, a geek, a jock, a mean girl or one of the elite, the in-crowd cool set that suavely operated above the rules?

Whichever clique you joined, in the office you may still be haunted by past alliances.

"When reacting to toxic cliques," says executive coach Stefanie Smith, "old feelings from long-ago school days may creep back into our psyches. We're only human.

"But you're a professional now," Smith adds. "So be careful to judge your best response based on present circumstances not past unresolved memories."

Gang warfare

Take sides in a divided workplace and you will be pitted against a gang of colleagues, Smith notes. So, if you are toying with taking a stand, ensure the commitment will be worth it down the track or forget it.

"Respond analytically, not emotionally," Smith says, adding that you should nevertheless resist the urge to play the referee unless your job is curbing conflict.

Divide and confide

If you are already entangled in a corporate civil war, step back and hear both sides, Smith says. Sort through the options and issues. If you have a strong view on the dispute or can inject valuable insight, then go ahead, express yourself, she says.

Again, however, talk to combatants separately - avoid getting marooned in the middle. "The last thing you want is to be caught in the crossfire. Instead, talk to each side from behind the battle lines or stay away altogether," Smith says.

Align with Switzerland

Author and consultant Barry Maher champions a similarly dispassionate tack that he calls the modified Switzerland approach. According to Maher, you want to be seen as ultra-neutral - above getting sucked into the maelstrom.

"It's not that you think you're better than the combatants; it's just that you're focused on other things, like reaching your goals and getting the work done and seeing the good in people, instead of trying to tear them down because they're in the enemy camp," Maher says.

Spread the love

Be cordial with everyone, Maher suggests. Remember that anything you say about anyone may well get back to that person and draw you into the quagmire.

The Switzerland approach sets you up as a potential impartial arbitrator if down the line you decide that you can help resolve the feud, Maher says, echoing Smith. He adds that if the conflict turns so sour that it interferes with doing or enjoying your job, it might be time to move to a firm where the air is less toxic.

The art of war

Partisanship apparently brings only one benefit. "You'll have someone to eat lunch with every day," writes employment analyst Dave Saunders in an online post.

Despite the guaranteed social gain, Saunders says aligning with a tribe is "a very dangerous political move" that may well backfire. Subsequent gossip, name-calling and isolation can be devastating, Saunders writes. Avoiding alliances is "the single best thing you can do to ensure your rise in your company", he adds before going on to warn of what happens when an enemy gets promoted above you. Imagine the awkwardness.

If, despite the consequences of involvement, dodging conflict strikes you as the easy way out - cowardly even - note that the darling of corporate strategists and military tacticians, Sun Tzu, endorses avoidance.

According to The Art of War author, "winning without fighting" is a key principle for managing every confrontation.

Pacifism carries the day.

THE BAGGAGE OF BULLYING

Workplace bullying can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder similar to that suffered by people who have been in combat situations, according to psychologist Dr Noreen Tehrani.

"Both groups suffer nightmares, are jumpy and seem fuelled by too much adrenalin."

Melbourne psychologist Christopher Shen says in extreme bullying cases victims experience trauma that requires professional support and advice.

If you are being bullied, phone WorkSafe Victoria on 1800 136 089 or WorkCover NSW on 136 089 or visit worksafe.vic.gov.au or workcover.nsw.gov.au.

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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