

## ARTICLE



# Techniques for Resolution of Work Conflicts in Organisations: The Loyal Fight

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## Abstract

A new methodology is suggested, the 'loyal fight', for intervening in conflicts which have become chronic within an organisation. The application and results obtained in a specific case are given, and also an evaluation of the importance of innovation in the field of work conflict resolution.



## Keywords

conflict resolution, organizational conflict, methodology, mediation, tools

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to demonstrate a technique for conflict resolution in organisations, based on its application in a specific case of conflict in work relations.

The 'loyal fight' is a methodology which has its origins in family mediation. It is based on the idea of generating a space for expression in non-threatening surroundings which allows strong emotions, pent up over a long period of time, to be released. This requires the organisations to adapt a space, something which has not yet been tried in Spain, and also a specific methodology.

The effects of this technique are immediate. It favours empowerment and recognises people's ability to express themselves outside the boundaries of formal hierarchy. It also acts to liberate strong emotions tied to specific problems which have become chronic over time, and releasing the emotional situation a new start point can be established. Finally, resources are generated so that each participant can recover their self-esteem and rework future relations on new foundations.

In the following we describe the rules for applying the technique and the conditions used in a specific case along with the results.

## 2. THE LOYAL FIGHT METHODOLOGY

The basis of the method is to first release aggressiveness, through the symbolic exercise of throwing darts as an attack on certain roles but without attacking the individuals involved. This should be done under highly controlled operational conditions.

Once the contained aggressiveness has been released, the confronting parties are placed in safe surroundings to be able to talk openly. This phase is called 'fight for change', and the aim is to work on more cognitive aspects in the relation and in some way draw up an agenda of topics to deal with in normal surroundings.

In the third stage, mutual recognition is worked on in such a way as to release tension and allow a second working session on the agenda drawn up.

The aim of the technique is to create conditions for dialogue and, very likely, the deeper problems should be approached in a later session of meditation, once the chronic tensions have been overcome using the resource proposed.

Here we look at the practical details for application:



## 2.1. Releasing aggression

The materials needed are darts and a dartboard used as follows:

Each one throws a dart, giving their reason. Only four possibilities are represented on the dartboard: the company, management, the company trade union committee and the trade union itself.

In this method, it must be emphasised that the person who throws the dart should say who they are aiming at and why, but this should never be against an individual, only against an institution, expressed abstractly, because of its role in one of the four possibilities on the board.

For example:

I, John Smith, throw a dart against the company because they did not fulfil their promise of promotion.

The rules are as follows:

Taking it in turns, each person should take part in at least three rounds of dart throwing.

From the third round, it is necessary to evaluate the energy in the group and those who want to throw more darts should be left free to do so.

The role of the moderator is as follows:

It is important to ensure messages are in the first person 'I', make them repeat their name and give a reason, just one for each dart (flexible interpretation of the reason). Note the message as material to be reused.

The aim of the exercise is to reduce tension by giving a way of expression through an indirect shot. Avoid direct attacks at individuals. Protect self-esteem. Reduce anxiety.

The time for the exercise is discretionary, depending on the energy of the group, but around 30 to 45 minutes.

## 2.2. Fight for change

In this phase, the appropriate setting is to form two groups around a table: the management team and the company union committee.

The groups should be well-differentiated in a confrontational position (sitting by a table, with the distances well defined). The moderator should occupy the most central position possible.

The rules are as follows:

The object of the exercise is to say things to each other's face avoiding direct attacks at self-esteem. Opinions are not as important as feelings, which should be brought out. All this must be explained before starting. Through the moderator, all agree that nothing that is said there will be held against them (no reprisals will be taken against anyone). Very aggressive criticism should be redirected by saying: "Express the same but in other words." There should be no immediate reaction. One speaks and the others listen. They express themselves only when it is their turn. The modera-

tor must be inflexible on this point. The expressed feeling must be listened to. Debate is only allowed at the end of the exercise, when discussion is open, so that there is complete liberation of feelings. It does not matter whether the complaints originated recently or 20 years ago (they are still present).

The role of moderator is important, and there should ideally be somebody to help. One takes notes and the other concentrates on the process. The emotions and their justification should be noted down. The problems themselves are not important, but how they are experienced. Reading basic emotions should be practiced.

Important resources to be considered for moderation are: order a break if things get too complicated, protect self-esteem, reformulate questions in extreme cases. It is useful to go from the person to the behaviour.

This stage should be at least an hour, generally depending on what happens. It is important to be flexible.

The objective of this phase is to rationalise the relation by bringing negative emotions to the surface. It is not a case of resolving a specific problem. It is important to build relations on new foundations.

## 2.3. Expressing recognition

In this last phase A4 paper cut in quarters and ballpoint pens are the materials needed, in the same room.

This is a writing exercise. All the participants are asked to send a written message to the others present which should be sincere (the writer should believe in what they write) and should express praise (criticism is prohibited).

The message can be anonymous or with the name of the sender (this is up to each participant), but the person it is sent to must be clearly identified.

Each one should take their time to briefly express praise. Each participant will receive the same number of flattering messages as the number of participants, minus one. The messages must be folded up and, when the moderator says to, each participant must open theirs and read them out loud. The exercise ends with applause.

At this level, the aim is to heal wounds, to come through the experience intact, strengthen self-esteem and to build a positive view of the participants.

The exercise should last about an hour, depending on the participants.

## 2.4. Practical advice

The location should be appropriate. It can be in a quiet room at the workplace. Make sure mobile phones are switched off. Landlines are disconnected. No interruptions are allowed.



The time for the whole process should be verified. The process should be controlled right from the beginning. The process should be explained only at each phase. Maintain interest in what will come next. Maintain the 'magic of the exercise' by not revealing this to the participants until it is to be carried out. Consider the possibility that the committee invites somebody from outside it to join in the experience if they want to, but control the number of participants whatever happens, as it will affect the time taken.

### 3. EXPERIENCE OF THE APPLICATION

#### 3.1. The background

X, S.L. is a company in the automobile support sector, located near Barcelona. The company makes safety components for all the major brands, employing around 320 workers on three shifts.

It is a typical industrial company, with the corresponding mentality of the workers and a major presence and influence of the major trade unions in the sector.

Over the years, a great deal of mutual distrust between Management and the Company Union Committee has built up. The union committee accuse management of not living up to their promises and of calling for sacrifices at times of huge profits. The point of view of the management is that the workers' representatives do not really have the interests of the workers in mind, but their own, basically an interest in not working, under any pretext.

In October 2003, the Company Manager retired, after more than 30 years working there, and a new management arrived. But the distrust was so deeply entrenched that the new directors were unable to re-establish a constructive relationship, for the good of all, using conventional methods.

The progress of the company – and this time it was true – did not allow the situation to continue as it was: not only did 5% of the workforce not work, but they also filed such a constant stream of grievances against the company, largely without any sound basis, that the Human Resources Manager spent more time at various Employment Tribunals than in the company, where he was needed to make the qualitative jump in management of the personnel.

The situation was intolerable, so the management had to do something out of the ordinary, more than just react with sanctions which achieved no more than add to the spiral of the conflict and to the destruction of any new input.

The decision was taken to look for professional help from an expert in conflict resolution in companies. After analysing the situation of the company with the management team (Company Director and Director of Human Resources), as well as the personalities of those involved, the business environment and other relevant variables, the expert suggested to us some extraordinary and innovative measures.

One of these ideas was a seminar on collective negotiation, which he himself gave, first to the management team and then – and this was what had the impact – to the union members. Another idea was that of the loyal fight.

#### 3.2. The experience of the loyal fight

Here we describe the experience in the words of the person who lead the session. She has training in psychology and human resource management, and is a member of staff of the company:<sup>1</sup>

“One day, we, the Management, and the Company Union Committee met in a room at a convention centre outside the workplace. The assistant moderator of the loyal fight was a colleague from the Human Resources Department, equally recognised by both parties as being impartial.

Once in the meeting room, I explained to those taking part in the loyal fight (Management and Company Union Committee), the rules to follow and the exercises, as has been explained previously. We started with the darts exercise, which was very positive because each participant used the dartboard to release all the negative emotions which they had felt for years. There was even an extra round so that everything was said.

With each exercise, we moved from a defensive, negative attitude to a positive one with trust. Each participant was even able to find positive aspects in the others, an exercise which seems easy but was the most difficult for all. They were aware that it is much easier to say something bad about others while it is difficult to highlight a person's positive aspects.

What was the result? Relations between Management and the Company Union Committee are now based on mutual trust. Management has recognised the positive side of each and every one of the workers' representatives. And the Union Committee understand that, in the end, we are all in the same ship, and that Management is certainly not against the interests of the workers, but act within the limits of reality, a

<sup>1</sup> By the Director of Human Resources of the company, published with authorisation.



highly competitive environment in which, today, every company must fight to survive.

We, Management and the Company Union Committee, still do not agree on many points when we meet. But we have developed a culture of coexistence and collaboration which does not look to defeat the other but strives towards a win/win situation. A culture which is based on trust that the other party is sincere and accessible.

For more than a year now there has been good feeling. And as we all understand the conditions for fruitful collaboration, we are sure that the quality of our relations will last.

Is this all the result of the loyal fight? It is impossible to say, as the loyal fight was one of a number of measures. What is certain is that, during the three hours of the fight, the atmosphere changed and the aggression which accompanied the throwing of the darts has not been heard again.”

#### 4. NEW WAYS FOR RESOLUTION OF WORK CONFLICTS

This experience is of great value as an indicator. On one hand it demonstrates that many legal conflicts cannot be resolved in court as they are really an expression of much more profound problems that affect the organisation. When one problem is solved another one appears because a medium has been generated for the growth of conflict.

Looking at management of companies, permanent conflict, to a certain extent chronic, should be seen as a loss of quality of interaction between people. Nowadays the quality of products is assumed, but not the quality needed for labour relations. From a different point of view, the workers suffer from a high level of dissatisfaction which becomes a real psycho-social risk. Generating conditions to improve the situation will be, or already is, an imperative.

Despite this, companies tend to think that, if conflict exists, it is due to management errors and, with this attitude, tend to minimise its existence. We understand that there exists a level of conflict which is perfectly admissible within a company, and this does not necessarily imply management errors. In fact, conflict may be a source of much innovation. In the case study we deal with, it is important to highlight the capacity of the new management of the company to assume controlled risks and experiment with unusual paths.

We believe that organisations should be capable of generating different and divers forms of management. Nowadays, it is known that organisations can learn and in the context of change, this new ability will be critical over the next few years. Negotiated rather than forced solutions are the future.

We have presented this specific case, because it is unprecedented and to encourage both companies and workers to reflect on whether their legitimate aspirations are adequately steered. Alternative Conflict Resolution has much to offer to help both sides understand better the legitimacy of their interests and their capacity to reach fair solutions. Nowadays, innovation means to be intelligent and to have understood. ■

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