



The Price of Nice...

Avoiding Confrontation Can Cost You Your Competitive Edge

By Mike Cook

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Business is a contact sport. For employers and employees alike, the rules of the game include confrontation and an ability to participate actively in it. Are you “up to” competing?

The implied employment contracts of the past are insufficient for workers today. The sentiment, “If you do good work and don’t give us any problems, you can count on a paycheck for a very long time,” no longer applies. Simply *being nice* has run its course. Simply *being nice* is not enough. Simply *being nice* can cost you your competitive edge.

Yes, of course, we still want nice. Nice and much more, actually. Are there times and ways when initiating confrontation can be the nice thing to do?

Tough Times Warrant Tough Conversations

We have all been drawn more or less kicking and screaming into the global economy. There is no turning back. New questions confront us:

- As an employee, can you now demand and forge employment relationships based on mutual shared interests instead of solely the interests of your employer? What types of conversation are required for this new relationship?
- Are you prepared to treat your working colleagues, managers, and co-workers alike, with an honesty that honors the high stakes game of our economic future? What is your comfort level with honesty and truth-telling?
- Are you now prepared to hear similar truths from the people you work with?
- Can you participate in productive confrontation and still maintain or even strengthen relationships?

Many of us have not been prepared emotionally or psychologically for the level of honest dialogue called for now. In many cases our employers are not any more prepared than we are. This is a problem and the solution is one for which *you* need to be responsible. The first step



to competing in the global economy is to cast aside your preference for polite and superficial conversations.

How Nice *Is* Your Workplace?

We might all like to believe that “you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” And while I am certainly not advocating hostility, I am suggesting that we face the objective realities of our work situations and relationships. To avoid doing so is far from nice. There is nothing “nice” about:

- Not being told until the last minute that your position is going to be eliminated.
- Not receiving an honest and objective assessment of your competency in an interview and later finding out after your next interview that you are unqualified.
- Not finding out until your yearly evaluation that you have performance issues that could have been addressed ‘in the moment,’ and now you are on the verge of being fired.

Conversations that present you with objective and “hard to hear” information may not be pleasant. And you need them anyway. Your competitive edge depends on them, in fact. If you have explicitly asked your evaluators, as you should, for this kind of feedback, it is possible to feel hurt, vulnerable, embarrassed, and yet grateful all at the same time. Can you trade in your fear of “being seen as a failure” or “not measuring up” for the gratitude inherent in being told the truth? Isn’t it nice to tell and be told the truth?

Fearing Failure Keeps Us From Being Competitive

Conceptually, we would all agree that we have much to learn from failed initiatives. However, as a culture, Americans have done a masterful job of stigmatizing failure to a point where those who fail even at the highest levels of accomplishment are subjected to questions of character and often off-handedly given the label of “loser.”

With this as a cultural backdrop, is it any wonder that American workers don’t clamor for honest evaluations of their performance?

A case in point would be the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece. Michael Phelps, a young American, was touted as a possible gold medal winner for each of the seven events in which he was entered. He won five gold medals and earned the bronze medal in the other two events. The headlines that followed his performances in those two events read, “Phelps Settles for Third,” as though he had made a conscious choice not to win the events! It certainly implied that if he was a true champion his two bronze medals would have been gold.

No one looks forward to being labeled a “loser.” In fact there are many people who would rather not compete at all than fail. But in the global economy, not competing is not an option.



We must redefine our ideas of failing as opportunities to learn, grow...and become more competitive.

“Toughening Up” Can Be Our Secret Weapon

“There’s no time like the present.” Now there’s an idiom that needs little explanation! In truth, *there is no time other than the present*. If you are going to prepare yourself today for what lies ahead, you will take the following steps:

- Immediately initiate a relationship with your employer or manager that sets mutually understood measures of desired performance.
- Among the ground rules you establish with your employer or manager, include a responsibility on their part to inform you *immediately* when they are not satisfied with your performance, suspect a limitation you are trying to protect, or observe a deficiency of which you may be unaware.
- Establish early on in your employment relationship that you do not expect lifetime employment; neither are you promising lifetime employment. You expect the relationship to last for so long as it is mutually beneficial. When the relationship is no longer viable, notice will be provided in a timeframe mindful of the challenges faced by all parties involved.

Do these conversations sound confrontational? They should. Each of these ideas confronts the “over-used and tired” employment relationships in place today. Those same relationships are the ones that keep you competitively over a barrel.

Take heart! The initial sting of these honest conversations will subside once you recognize the “gift” of personal insight and opportunity for growth you have received. After the conversations are complete, ask yourself “What have I learned and how will I use that information to become even more ‘confrontational’ and competitive?” Rather than dreading or avoiding tough conversations, it is possible for you to now embrace and welcome them. They are your secret weapon to competing in the global marketplace.

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