

Trouble in the Sandbox

What's an executive to do when conflict steals the show?

STORY BY DORY HOLLANDER

Two of your valuable direct reports are in constant conflict. They're building a wall that their own direct reports dare not breach. In executive meetings one swipes, the other snarls. You're keeping an eye on the situation, but business is growing. They're valuable to your Kansas City business. Bottom line: You don't want to lose either of them.

ANALYSIS

Conflict and competition are a healthy part of executive teamwork. Put a bunch of ambitious rising stars in a boardroom and they'll poke holes in each other's ideas, strut, dominate, hold forth, thrash it out and finally agree on a plan. Direct reports vie for power, cross into each other's turf, assume credit for what is theirs and what is not. All in a day's work.

But when two direct reports declare war on each other, their personal conflict acts like a toxin that spreads divisive tension across the organization. Soon, competitive strategies, normally directed to marketplace rivals, are deployed on the homefront. Competition turned inward is a powerful deterrent to organizational success.

TYPICAL RESPONSES

It's tempting to step back and let a high-profile conflict ride out and hope that the two will make up. This often is the de facto reaction. Neither running for the hills nor hoping for the best is effective. Without some intervention, the head butting will escalate. Many executives shy away from addressing disruptive peer-to-peer conflict, only to realize later that this was interpreted as his or her tacit approval for bad behavior.

Unintended results are copycat rivalries and a quick trip to **Monster.com** for the rank-and-file who will tell you in their exit interview that they simply have had enough.

So, what about stepping in and taking swift and decisive action? Your instinct to do something is right, but your impatience could get in the way. The result may be peace without harmony, relief without

resolution. You win a fast band-aid cessation of hostility without getting to the conflict's root cause. The unexpected result is *deja vu* all over again.

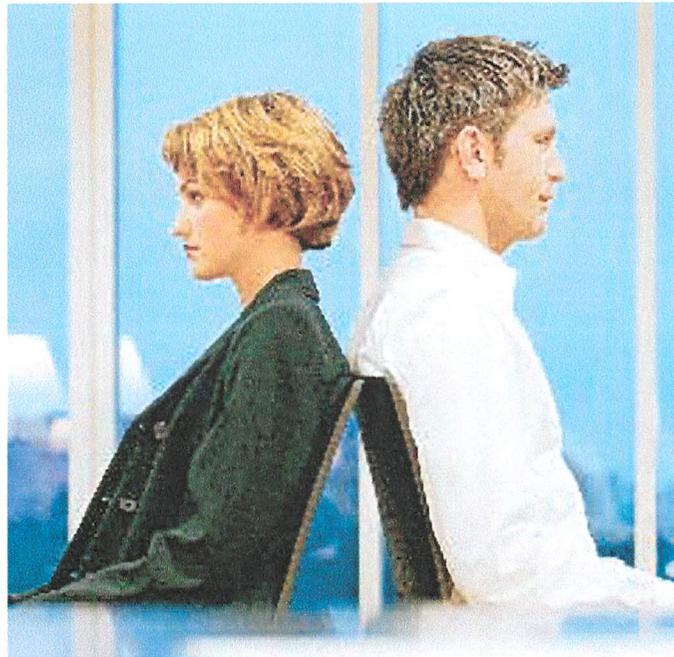
BEST BET APPROACHES

Step back before stepping out or stepping in. As an executive manager, you are in the people development business. When conflicts break out among the members of your executive team, it pays to pay attention.

First, it helps to shift your mental model from doing the work of the business to managing and growing your executive team. Meet with each direct report weekly to understand

what's working and what is not. Listen carefully to what they say, ask probing questions to get to what is real for them. Don't feel compelled to provide answers or solve your direct reports' issues. Your mission is to understand the situation for each of your direct reports.

What does this have to do with your two warriors who are fighting each other, rather than competitors? Since intractable, persistent conflicts arise from diverse causes, your job is to put any assumptions aside and be a super sleuth. Spot potential problems in your organization's infrastructure, in your own leadership style, and in the traits and mindsets of your executive team that trigger latent rivalries and conflicts. **KCB**



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