

Unit 2 Case Study Perspectives on Conflict

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“Half Empty/Half Full”

Frank has been happily employed as a paralegal in a successful attorneys’ office for the last four years. He manages the office of some five other paralegals, all of whom work well together. Because business has been growing rapidly, one of the attorneys hired an additional paralegal. Reno, the new employee and a recent college graduate, and Frank have not been hitting it off well, which has been causing serious problems within the office. After four months of on-going conflict between Frank and Reno, which has affected the business adversely, their individual bosses have called them into their offices to find out what the problem between them is.

As Frank sat in his boss’s office, he said, “I just can’t work with him. I don’t know what it is exactly, but he really grates on my nerves. For instance, the other day, I asked him to stay a few minutes after work to come to our employees’ meeting and he said it wasn’t possible—he had to go home. He works here, so, like everyone else, he should come to the meetings.”

Linda, Frank’s boss, responded, “I understand that you wanted him to come to the meeting, but this problem has been going on for a while, for at least four months that I know about. What is going on?”

“Reno is like a loose cannon,” Frank said, “he reacts to any suggestion I make. When I ask him to do something or tell him how we do things here, he explodes. Why can’t he just listen and do what I tell him? I’m the office manager!” Frank proclaimed.

Linda thought for a moment, then quietly said, “Have you tried to talk with him, one-on-one, about how you’re feeling? Maybe if you set up a time to talk with him and tell him exactly what you want him to do....”

“Talk with him!” Frank interrupted. “No, I can’t talk with him; he seems so hostile toward me and everyone else in the office. If I tried to talk with him directly, we would probably end up screaming at each other. Look, Linda, I’m the office manager; Reno knows he’s supposed to do what I ask him to do. I would prefer to settle this quietly and not create a bigger problem than it already is. Besides, I was always taught that given enough time, these kinds of problems will work themselves out.”

As Frank and Linda talked in one office, Reno and Sam, Reno’s boss, talked in another office. “What is it with Frank?” Reno asked. “Why can’t he tell me what’s wrong? He tells me to do something; I do it, and then he sits there, boiling mad. He’s like a volcano that never explodes.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sam.

“Last week, for example, he asked me to stay after work for a meeting. I told him it wasn’t possible; I needed to get home to my family. Maybe I could have stayed if he told me in advance so I could plan ahead, but he never said anything until the last minute. After I said ‘no,’ he just looked at

me and fumed. He didn't say anything, but I could tell he was very upset."

"Okay, what else?" asked Sam.

"He pushes me around the office," said Reno."

"Pushes you around the office?" inquired Sam.

"Yes, he pushes me—verbally, I mean," said Reno, "He tells me how to research cases, answer phones, and fill out client forms. I graduated with my B.S. degree; I know how to be a paralegal. He doesn't need to constantly tell me how to do my job."

Sam said, "Maybe he's just trying to tell you how we do things in this particular office."

"Well, he doesn't need to treat me like an idiot. I wish he would confront me, one-on-one so we could clear the air. I was raised to believe that we should deal with our problems mano-a-mano. But I don't think he ever will; he's too polite."

Meanwhile, in Linda's office, "I don't want this problem to turn into some sort of war; I just want him to do his job and I'll to do mine and everything will be fine."

"And how can we make that happen?" Linda said.

"I don't know," replied Frank. "I guess we should wait to see what happens."

"I know hens my boss," said Reno in the other office, "but if he doesn't back off...."

And so the discussions went.