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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Harvard Business Review
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Senior Managers Won't Always Get Along

It's virtually impossible to like everyone you meet. It's even more unlikely that you will get along with everyone at work. People have different personalities, biases, values, ambitions, and interests, all of which affect the chemistry of their relationships. And if you throw in the pressures of the workplace, it's hardly surprising that tensions arise between colleagues and co-workers. But when members of a senior management team don't get along, the negative impacts can cascade through an organization. Those conflicts have the potential to reduce productivity and morale for dozens or hundreds of people.

Let's look at a two (disguised, but real) examples:

- In a manufacturing organization, three members of the senior team were told that they were on the short-list to become the next CEO. The ensuing competition exacerbated already strained relationships between them, such that they barely talked with each other outside of formal meetings. Taking cues from their bosses, the people that worked for them began to form "camps" and reduced their levels of cross-functional discussion and collaboration as well.
- In a financial services firm with a history of fairly autonomous business units, one senior manager was charged with creating a common approach to product development. After several of the business leaders pushed back on the standardized approach, she wrote them off and thereafter only worked with friendly and receptive areas.

It would be easy to say in both of these cases that the CEO should have intervened and forced people to work together more effectively. The reality is that in many organizations the CEO is either unaware of these dynamics, doesn't know what to do, or chooses to ignore them, thinking that senior managers should be able to work these things out on their own. In other cases, like the first example here, the CEO might even foster the competition, almost like a lab experiment to see what happens.

So what can you do if you are part of a "frosty" management team, either as a direct contributor to the tension, or an observer of the dysfunction? Here are two suggestions:



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First, get the issues out from under the rocks and into the light of day. Few things cripple a management team more than having elephants in the room – and in the organization – that no one acknowledges. Get beyond the conspiracy of silence by talking to the key parties, either individually, in small groups, or as a team, about what’s going on. This needs to be done delicately and sensitively, without blaming anyone or pointing fingers (which could make things worse), but the conversations need to get started with a goal of making the business better.

In the case of the competing executives cited above, for example, one of the managers initiated a lunch meeting for the three of them – and explicitly talked about the awkwardness of the situation and how it was affecting other people on their team and in the company. All three then agreed that, while the situation was not optimal, they should do everything possible to do what’s best for the company and not just their own ambitions – and they conveyed this to their teams. Although this didn’t end the tensions, it certainly made it easier to keep doing business until a new CEO was selected.

The second way to deal with situations like these is to gently force the contending people to work together on projects or issues that are important to the company. In other words, when senior managers need to put on “bigger hats,” it helps them to transcend the interpersonal rivalries and dislikes in order to achieve the broader objective. For example, in the financial services company mentioned earlier, the HR executive, concerned about the deteriorating relationships, quietly influenced the CEO to tackle a key strategic issue by setting up a few small cross-functional teams – and made sure that the executives who were not getting along were paired up.

There is nothing that says that members of a leadership team need to like each other. They do need to realize however that when they don’t “get along” their dysfunctional relationships can reverberate throughout the organization. Preventing this from happening is a responsibility of the whole team.

[Ron Ashkenas'](http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/03/when-senior-managers-dont-get-along-everyone-suffers/) blog post on Harvard Business Review
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