

## WORK & FAMILY

# To Fight, or Not to Fight?

How to Pick Your Battles in the Workplace

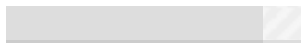
By **SUE SHELLENBARGER**

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Aggravations on the job are a fact of life. From the colleague who steals your chair to the colleague who steals your clients, there is enough potential for conflict to take up most of the work week.

### WSJ Radio

Sue Shellenbarger and WSJ This Morning's Gordon Deal discuss picking your battles in the workplace.



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The trick is figuring out which issues are worth going to war over. Picking your battles is an art worth learning.

To do it well, tackle only problems that are truly important. Before confronting someone, says executive coach Lynne Eisaguirre of Boulder, Colo., it's important to examine your

motives. Does the issue really matter to your employer, your colleagues or your ability to do your job?

While the risks of speaking up may be apparent—hurt feelings, a damaged career—not speaking up has its risks, too, especially if your annoyance is shared by others.

Many people avoid confrontations, says Dr. Shelley Reciniello, New York, an executive coach and psychologist. But simmering frustrations can come out in other ways, fostering passive-aggressive behavior such as slacking off or backstabbing.

People “kick the dog, go into denial, get depressed or anxious, quit their jobs, blame themselves—they do all kinds of things except deal with what has to be addressed,” Dr. Reciniello says.

It's important to weigh your ability to control your emotions during a confrontation and



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## LOSING BATTLES

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In some situations, consider a retreat.

- Don't wage war without offering a solution or suggested route to one.
- Don't pick fights over issues that aren't important to your employer or your ability to work.
- Don't battle over issues outside your area of influence or responsibility.
- Don't take on colleagues because you dislike their personality.
- Don't pick battles with co-workers who are far more powerful than you.

the app for e-filing. Mr. Hendricks says both were working as hard and fast as they could, and “we were sensitive about rocking the boat too much.”

When they did confront each other after a few weeks of tension, it was tough to keep their frustrations in check, and the conversation was more confrontational than they had planned. They agreed on a compromise and launched the app successfully just a couple of weeks later than planned, but both say they wish they had raised the issue sooner.

to manage any counterfire from your opponent. If you're not sure you can keep a lid on your emotions, find a safe place to vent first, by talking to a therapist or other counselor, friend or spouse, says Ms. Eisaguirre.

Bill Hendricks and Charles Logston avoided dealing with mounting tensions last January about when to launch a new product, an app for filing simple federal tax forms.

Mr. Logston, chief technical officer and co-founder of Common Form Inc., San

Diego, wanted to market the app early in the tax season. Mr. Hendricks, chief executive officer and also a co-founder, wanted to wait for Internal Revenue Service approval for using



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## WINNING STRATEGIES

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- Plan ahead on how to describe the problem and draw the listener into helping solve it.
- Ask yourself whether you will be able to control your emotions when discussing the issue.
- Think about whether you can deal with any criticisms that may be fired back at you.
- Take up the conflict with someone who has the power to do something about it.
- Bring up disagreements as soon as you know they're going to be a problem.
- Test support for your position informally with trusted colleagues

former employer, a restaurant, gripe about two co-workers who hogged tables for big parties. “Whoever rushed there first” got the big tables—and the biggest tips. The gossip and the unfairness of the system made her “angry at work, and after work,” says Ms. Burke, of Boston, a marketing supervisor for WyckWyre Food Industry HR Systems. “I finally decided to take a stand.”

After working there for more than a year, she knew she had credibility with the person who had the power to solve the problem—her manager. She raised the problem with him, explaining that the setup was unfair and that most of her co-workers were upset, too. She also suggested a solution—rotating the big tables among all the servers—and

Mr. Hendricks says, “It only becomes harder to deal with, the longer you wait.”

Such disputes are common. More than 4 out of 5 corporate employees have conflicts with other employees over priorities, misunderstandings, resources or personality differences, and half of them say they turn out less work as a result, according to a recent survey of 150 employees by Harris Poll for AtTask, a Lehi, Utah, maker of project-management applications.

When picking a battle, it is important to be willing to offer a solution or work with others to find one. Michelle Burke says she grew tired several years ago of hearing other waiters at her

argued that customers would get better service if waiters served just one large party at a time. The manager adopted her suggestion.

Confronting others can require taking responsibility for your own part in the problem, says Patrick Hehir, president of Business Value Group, a Saratoga, Calif., consulting firm specializing in turnarounds and restructuring. Several years ago on a former job as a senior leadership-development executive, Mr. Hehir was engaged in a turf war with another senior executive. Both maneuvered to undermine each other in areas where their responsibilities overlapped.

As he thought about the problem, he realized his behavior clashed with the skills he was coaching others to use. “I pushed myself up out of my chair and walked down the hall” to his rival’s office, he says. “It was the longest walk of my life.”

Mr. Hehir asked his colleague, Paul Humphries, to talk, and said: “I’m playing games with you and you’re playing games with me, yet you and I both talk with others on our team about collaborating more.”

Mr. Humphries says he also wanted to clear the air, and he was relieved when Mr. Hehir “came in and laid it out on the table.” They talked over their differences and agreed to address conflicts face-to-face. “It was liberating,” Mr. Hehir says.

It’s better to avoid some kinds of battles altogether, such as disputes over someone’s personality or style, says Ms. Eisaguirre, author of several books on workplace conflict and communication.

Also, it isn’t wise to take up conflicts with people who are a lot more powerful than you, or fights over matters you can’t control, she says. For example, some teams fight over tight budgets when they don’t have any ability to increase funding. It’s also important to weigh whether your managers will support you in resolving conflicts openly.

Dale Janée was frustrated when co-workers on her first sales job years ago stole some of her leads before she could close the sales. She knew she would have to present detailed arguments and evidence to win a fight over the issue, and she didn’t expect much support from her immediate manager.

She eventually concluded that doing battle “wasn’t worth it,” says Ms. Janée, founder of Savvy Sleepers, San Francisco.

She channeled her frustration into other pursuits—writing a fashion blog, working as a

stylist and developing a new beauty product, a satin pillowcase. She continued to do her job and got promoted to a customer-service position, but “spent every hour of down time starting my own business,” she says. By the time she left the company several years later, she had established a new career.

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