



MAKING LIFE DIFFICULT

Colleague conflict can prove extremely difficult to resolve – but we're here to help *By Laura Stewart*

When the story of Iris Robinson's affair broke, there was one small detail that I found quite interesting after picking myself up off the floor when I heard the age of her lover.

Although unremarkable when set against everything else that unfolded, I was quite surprised to learn that Belfast City Council employs a "stress counsellor". Selwin Black – the whistle blower who spoke to the BBC *Spotlight* programme about the former MP's affair – has been providing support to council workers since 2003, and in fact, Dublin City Council also employed his company to evaluate their in-house support services.

But it seems stress counsellors are an increasingly common presence in large organisations as management have copped on to the fact that, on average, stress is the source of more lost working days than the common cold. What's more, it's a much more serious problem in Ireland than in the UK, according to the Samaritans. Their most recent

survey found that a massive 81 per cent of workers here claim to have been bullied at some point in their careers, and alarmingly, conflict at work is cited as a weekly or daily cause of stress for more than one in four Irish employees.

As one who, in the past, has lost hours of potential sleeping time through anxiety brought home from work, I can appreciate this. I've tossed and turned, replayed conversations in my mind, tortured myself by mentally editing what happened – replacing what I did say for what I should have said. Then, at 3am, when I've scripted the imaginary scene that should have unfolded in the office 10 hours earlier, I beat myself up for not thinking of that genius line when I really needed it. Then the light starts to peek through the curtains reminding me that it's nearly morning. And the dread... oh the dread of having to go in and work with this person again today.

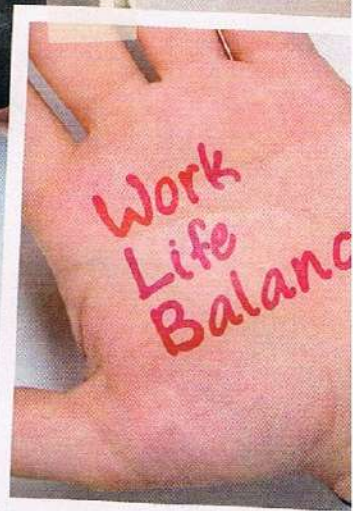
Am I on my own on this? I was relieved to hear Dublin-based stress counsellor Michaela

Brady confirm that I'm not. The director of Aspir Counselling has gained extensive insight into the impact of difficult employee relationships over the years and she points out that this is usually a source of greater stress than the work itself.

"I've counselled so many clients who let work conflict overshadow their entire lives, so they're sleeping at night because they're worried about the following day and they don't enjoy Sundays because they're dreading the week ahead, or they ruin the end of their holidays by fretting about going back again. It's a natural response, but it's not healthy and over time, if work issues aren't



So many clients let work conflict overshadow their lives so they're not sleeping



resolved, they can lead to a lack of self esteem, addictive behaviour or even depression."

But learning to deal with difficult colleagues is actually a great life lesson, as you can apply the same skills to conflict situations outside work – family dramas, friendships and the relationship with your partner or spouse.

"It's really important to develop constructive ways of dealing with difficult people to progress in your career," says Michaela.

TYPES OF COLLEAGUE

And "difficult" can mean different things for different individuals. One example is the Drama Queen: This is the employee who goes from one crisis to another, always overly dramatic or aggressive in his or her response to events. Michaela stresses that you can't fight fire with fire, so remaining calm is essential.

"Sometimes no response at all is the best tactic as you might be encouraging this kind of over-reactive behaviour. But if you do react, do it in a calm way. When you lose control, you've lost the argument. Raising your voice or slamming doors actually diminishes your authority. Someone who is calm is seen as being in control, more dignified and more deserving of respect."

But it's not always easy to remain detached and above the emotion of the conflict, is it? Michaela agrees but says it helps to visualize yourself observing the scene, but removed from the heat of it. "Learn to breathe slowly and above all else, listen to the other person – let them have their say first."

Listening is not only important in terms of coming across as reasonable and in control – it also gives you time to form a response in your head.

"Even though your colleague's issues might seem irrational to you, for them it is important and probably has, at its base, some real concern, frustration, issue, or problem," says Michaela. "Not speaking also allows you to articulate your thoughts and prevents you from saying anything you might regret."

THEN THERE'S THE GOSSIP MONGER

Although we all love it, Michaela stresses that allowing yourself to be drawn in to office gossip can be dangerous, because just by listening, you can be aligning yourself with one person or group and you may regret it later, especially if you discover that much of what you've been told was hearsay or just malicious rumour.

"When you gossip about someone else, you tend to focus on negativity, and paint that person in a negative way. That affects your thinking and actually shortens your patience, particularly when you get covert support from others."

MANAGERS

Although they often come in for bad press in the office, managers can face daily uphill struggles with difficult colleagues. So how do you deal with demotivated staff who seem to be deliberately making your life difficult?

"Even when it may seem that the person is just determined to undermine you, there is usually some underlying reason that is motivating them to act this way," says Michaela.

"Identifying their motivation is key to tackling their behaviour. What's making him or her act in this manner? It may be family problems that have nothing to do with work – maybe they need a bit of time off to resolve them.

"Sit down with the person and explain where you are coming from.

"Sometimes people are difficult because they feel excluded. Letting them in on the reason behind your actions might enable them to empathize with your situation. And always treat the person with respect

"If you show disrespect, you can expect the same in return."

It's also important to remember that everyone is different, with different views and ways of working that are not necessarily wrong just because they don't match yours. In fact, sometimes it's important to acknowledge your own role in creating conflict, or your own hand in the failure of a project.

But don't expect to 'fix' a colleague. You can, however, limit his or her influence, and not reinforce difficult behaviour, particularly if you build a rapport.

"Finding common ground can help to do this," says Michaela. "Go out with them for lunches or dinners – get to know them as people, and not just colleagues. Learn more about their hobbies, their family, their lives."

Above all else, when things go wrong, you should focus on what you can change, rather than the damage that's been done.



"Express your frustration in a calm way, but then move on – focus on the steps you can take"

"When an employee, for example, loses a lot of money for the company, it can be hugely stressful of course, but it can't be changed. So address what happened and the reasons for it, and by all means express your frustration in a calm way, but then move on – focus on the actionable steps you can take so it doesn't happen again in the future."

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

Speak to your manager or HR. This is considered the trump card and shouldn't be used unless you've completely exhausted your means. Sometimes, the

only way to get someone moving is through a top-down approach.

THE LAW

You may find yourself at the stage where you feel you have to seek legal advice, and John Hogan of Ler Solicitors says employment law is an area of increasing concern for employers and workers in Ireland since the demise of the Celtic Tiger.

"Most larger companies have established grievance procedures – it's usually employees or managers of smaller companies who need to consult our firm

Of course all workers in Ireland have a right under the Constitution to join a trade union, however over the past 15 years, according to John, employers have increasingly been given statutory rights that mean they don't necessarily have to go through unions to introduce changes or cuts.

And as the economy struggles to recover from recession, many workers may feel that their jobs are under threat and that their employers are deliberately making their lives difficult in the hope of casting them out. If this is the case, there are several options available, depending on the individual circumstances.

"If someone feels victimised and has exhausted internal avenues, they could be in a position to claim for constructive dismissal. They must have at least a year's experience in the role though, and if it is proven they can be awarded up to two year's severance

But not everyone can afford to consult a lawyer and the good news is that there is a wealth of free information at your fingertips if you need it – Citi Information is a good start. **WW**

Below is a list of useful contacts if you feel you have an employment relations issue or grievance and you need help or support:

Citizens Information
www.citizensinformation.ie

Michaela Brady
Aspire Counselling and Psychotherapy Services
13 Herbert Place,
Dublin 2.
Phone: 087 782 4957
Email: michaela@aspirecounselling.com

LEMANS SOLICITORS
8-34 Percy Place
Dublin 4, Ireland
Tel: 01 639 3000
www.lemansolicitors.com

Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution
www.cedr.co.uk

Chartered Institute of Arbitrators - Irish branch
www.arbitration.ie

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
www.entemp.ie

The Labour Relations Commission
www.lrc.ie