

Howard M. Guttman, principal of the management consulting firm Guttman Development Strategies in Ledgewood, recently published 'When Goliaths Clash' (Amacom; 250 pages), a guide to managing conflict and power struggles in the workplace. A former human resources executive for Johnson & Johnson, Guttman has worked with clients that include Colgate-Palmolive, Sara Lee, Campbell Soup, Pfizer and Motorola. He has taught at the Rutgers Graduate School of Management and the Graduate School of Psychology at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Guttman discusses methods of conflict resolution with Associate Editor João-Pierre S. Ruth.

On Managing Office Power Struggles

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NJBIZ: What inspired the book?

Guttman: It was inspired by our work through the years. It became very clear to us that we were touching one of the Twilight Zone topics: conflict in organizations. 'Almost like corporate bad breath,' is the way people describe it. It was a constant underpinning of our work with senior executives. Rather than avoid it, if people could channel it, it could become a competitive edge we could work with. We did an article around that topic and it really hit a nerve.

NJBIZ: What can happen when conflicts go unchecked?

Guttman: Just look at all the things that have occurred with Enron and all the rest where you have these huge issues and discord at the top. It's not like people weren't aware of these things going on. All of a sudden you see these whistleblowers seen as heroes. They are just a mark that the organization is dysfunctional. These things are really played out under wraps behind a facade. All of these things you see out there are not really a shock to everybody. It's just that it's coming out of the closet.

NJBIZ: What are the warning signs that a conflict is getting out of hand?

Guttman: Some warning signs are when you work with a senior team and the air gets thick very quickly when certain people speak. There are people whose heads go down when that person speaks and people don't make eye contact. There is a semblance of genteelness that gets played out. It is this lack of authenticity that gets played out. It's the avoidance of conversations.

NJBIZ: Some executives might say a bit of rivalry is healthy in the workplace.

Guttman: If you want to get ahead in the market, you better be out for winning. But if that is the game you play with the people on the same team, you will have an organization that turns in on itself and competes internally. What is the game you are trying to win? That can be damaging internally. The higher you look up the ladder, the senior players of the team have more at stake. People don't want to make career-limiting moves. The three things needed [to reach agreement] are to have the senior team engage in policy protocols, ground rules and a change of mind-set so you can come to terms on conflicts.

NJBIZ: What personality types do you see in the workplace?

Guttman: Generally there are three types of behaviors you see played out. One is the aggressive type. They usually play a win-lose game. They don't pull their punches, which is the good news, but they don't necessarily get other people's point of view. Then you have the conservative group. They don't let people know where they stand. They

play things close. The third group is the assertive group, who put their cards on the table and listen. The assertive group is what you are trying to grow.

NJBIZ: When do companies seek help in resolving conflict?

Guttman: Usually they call us when they want to develop a high-performing team. They usually don't say, 'My team is broken, fix my team.' We have a conversation with the leader to see if the team is coachable. The leader also has to be coachable. We do the alignment of the team where we are dealing with issues of team priorities. For it to play out right, the leader doesn't necessarily have to be better than everyone else. Before we do anything we have to make sure a new client with a good idea wants to play this through.

NJBIZ: What approaches do you use?

Guttman: Usually what happens when we do an alignment of a senior team [is that] we have over 90 minutes where the leader talks about what they want to accomplish. They talk about where they want to go. Then we talk to them for two days. Then we check on them three-to-five months down the line. They may have moved around, or the car may be somewhat off the track. It takes nine months or so. We come in periodically and shift the way people have played it out. As companies become more global, that becomes more attractive in the end. There is a major competitive advantage. It is not realistic to think that one [method] can be all things to all people. The first thing to do when in doubt or [when you] think there is an issue there is to call it. Not in a judgmental way, just say, 'It sounds like there is an issue here.' The first step is to name it. That starts to dissipate the problem rather than play the Emperor's New Clothes game [in which] things go underground. Then the team sees where it has the desire to get to another level.

NJBIZ: What do you seek to avoid?

Guttman: What you are trying to avoid is creating a dysfunctional model for the rest of the organization to emulate. If the senior team appears dysfunctional, it sets a precedent. It's not an example you want the rest of the organization to follow. You'll see drops in product efficiency, accountability and people's willingness to take ownership for their actions. You have people pointing to the top rather than at themselves. Competitive [market] cycles don't last long. Companies can compete on cost, but [they can] only cut so far to compete in the market. They want to develop a long-term sustainable edge. We are trying to make the company more competitive. If you can get a high-performing team in the company, you have changed the whole game in terms of speed and accountability.