

# “From Conflict to Collaboration”

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## Context

The company was in the business of fitting people with assistive devices such as artificial limbs and braces.

Professionals in outlying offices examined clients and sent specifications to a central facility. Artisans working there used the specs to produce orthotics and prosthetics from metal, wood, plastic, plaster, leather and other materials.

A belligerent culture had sprung up in the fabrication area, to the point that a couple of confrontations had become physical. Things were getting worse.

## Challenge

It was imperative that a collaborative atmosphere be restored, since the department needed to improve its productivity. Reimbursement rates were dropping, so the company had to increase output with fewer people while maintaining quality.

That meant processes needed streamlining and the workers would have to participate in cross-training, an impossibility if attitudes did not improve.

## Solution

The owner decided the group needed training in conflict management, and brought in Jim Milliken Consulting to provide it. The training was completed without incident, but it was obvious to Jim Milliken that the sessions were leaving underlying issues untouched.

Milliken proposed that he be permitted to interview all the parties individually to get at the root of the problem. That was done, and the 13 individuals involved were much more open and informative in the one-on-one conversations. Jim Milliken’s skills from a long previous career as a newspaper reporter made the interviews very productive.

It turned out that the manager of the fabrication department was so averse to conflict – or even the prospect of argument – that he refused to do anything about problems brought to him for solution.

He was devoted to the work, and would not consider changing anything. Process issues as well as personal disputes went unresolved. The frustrated staff members were at each other’s throats.

That manager was, however, excellent at the technology of the work itself.

The consultant proposed, and the owner instituted, a realignment of roles in which the manager was appointed to a new position, that of trainer and resource person for the manufacturing operation.

At the same time, a qualified “people person” became manager of the staff.

## Result

With the new roles established, the work processes were straightened out and the problems addressed. Behavior guidelines, personal counseling and discipline were introduced. Several employees left.

There was an immediate cessation of interpersonal conflict.

A cross-training program was designed and instituted. It was fully operational within weeks, and was producing the desired results.



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