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inside

leadership

Corporate Civil War

Sometimes, "Us vs. Them" Is *Not* Helpful!

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The average manager (at least in the United States) thinks that the War Between the States ended more than 100 years ago and is now just a subject for school kids. But "civil" wars are waged every day in corporate America.

For some companies, it's the never-ending battle between the home office and the field. For others, it's the testy, strained communications between Plant No. 1 and Plant No. 2. And for still others, it's the ongoing argument between marketing and engineering… or production and shipping… or R&D and manufacturing… or, well, fill in the blanks yourself.

The "bloodshed" is often invisible. And sometimes the conflict is as harmless as the occasional petty bickering at staff meetings — the verbal jabs that seem playful on the surface but sometimes deeply pierce the skin. ("Hey, buddy! What's that you say, Charley? Whoa! You missed your production quota again? Isn't that the fifth time this year?")

Yet corporate civil wars can escalate into much bigger stuff. Consider:

- The company where interdepartmental rivalry routinely causes product innovations to take years and years.

- The company where "customer handoffs" are so much the norm that no customer complaint is ever handled with a single call.

- The company where employees think their greatest competition is the department down the hall.

- The company that boasts of being "global" yet finds employees routinely trashing their fellow employees who were born in other countries.

I call it a "civil war" whenever two or more units of a company make a resolute, determined decision *not* to communicate, cooperate, share resources, or engage in teamwork with one another.

Why does this happen? I've observed three principal reasons.

First, when the CEO or COO tolerates such behavior, it encourages petty internal squabbling to continue and worsen. I remain amazed at how often, in large companies, only a select few (starting at the CEO level) have a super-ordinate perspective. I recall hearing the chief scientist of one company (which ultimately dissolved) saying, in retrospect, that most employees pretended that "it was somebody else's end of the boat that was sinking."

It is irrational to think that one part of a company can shine while the department or division one door down the hall rots.

Second, internal competition often goes too far. Do you recall the B-school case study about the production manager who boosted productivity beyond his wildest dreams (albeit temporarily) by setting up a "race" between the three shifts he supervised – awarding raises and other incentives to the "best" shift?

At first, it all seemed like good-natured fun, something to liven up the daily routine. But, taken too far, such intracompany competition can embitter one shift toward another. The final outcome is loss of respect for the problems and performance of business colleagues.

Finally, there is the classic case: the company that has grown to the point of internal implosion. After starting small, with perhaps a single team of workers and a single product, the company is now a multifunctional operation, making and marketing numerous products to an international customer base. And, with that growth, huge parts of the company have lost touch with each other. Employees are no longer encouraged to form an affiliation with a network of employees and managers.

No one is ever given the time to visit other corporate operations (even the much-clichéd "next people receiving your work").

The result? People who receive paychecks bearing the same company logo often view their diverse counterparts as "foreigners" to be avoided, left to fend for themselves.

"So, where's the harm?" you ask.

On the mildest level, corporate civil wars cultivate a work environment that is isolated and uncomfortable. At the most damaging level, internal war misdirects the focus of everyone who works for the company. The "enemy" for any business should never be those folks working across the hall; the enemy is the competitor who is plotting to steal your customers away.

If people in your company are fostering a "civil war" mentality, perhaps it's time to call them to task. Ignoring today's internal battles could produce real bloodshed later on.