Workplace tension

What theory best guides a counsellor in improving workplace tension among co-workers? Workplace tension is a common enough element that is present in most employee environments today. Workplace tension is oftentimes equated with workplace stress, since they evoke the same feeling of anxiety due to the presence of certain work-related elements. Stress is the body's reaction to a perceived threat or risk, and this can come from any number of causes such as the fear of being fired or the stress of being challenged at work. Workplace tension in the context of this discussion, however, refers more to the interpersonal relationships among co-workers. The tension exists apparently due to differences between co-workers, and the counsellor directs his or her efforts towards the discovery and removal of this source of tension.

When tension exists between co-workers, their attention shifts from the main job they are performing to the source of their stress – the other co-worker. Workplace tension among co-workers develops into workplace conflict if the sources of the tension are not discovered and eliminated at the soonest possible time. The co-workers involved tend to be occupied by their personal conflicts and therefore become distracted from their jobs. Because they cannot function at their peak, these workers experience reduced productivity, which results in reduced efficiency and therefore higher costs for the organization. This may be seen as a slowdown during operations, or increasing errors committed on the job that lead to lower quality and additional rework costs. Although workplace tension is a personal thing, it is therefore in the company's better interest that such tension be avoided, usually through proactive counselling.

There are many theories the counsellor may be guided by. The theory I

believe could best help the counsellor in eliminating workplace tension is the Motivational Systems Theory (MST), formulated by Martin Ford in 1992. The MST tries to present in an organized manner a clear image of the different motivation theories. It recognizes the interaction of the individual and his environment, on his way to his career-related goals, and how important a person's motivation is to the way he functions (Patton & McMahon, 1998: 140).

In applying MST, the counsellor must try to understand the individual worker's motivation, and the different factors affecting his motivation such as biological, environmental, skills, knowledge, and circumstances, as well as factors relating to hic job. While many of these factors are personal to the individual worker and do not originate from the job, they could be a source of tension if they conflict with those attributes possessed by a co-worker. Conflicting differences among co-workers therefore tend to cause friction and a stressful work environment.

In the MST, the counsellor approaches the worker systematically, making use of dialogue to gain an insight into the problem from the perspective of the worker. The counsellor does not rely on absolute principles or formal quantitative assessment in the way traditional counselling does. Instead, the counsellor uses narrative and qualitative assessment (e. g. autobiography, recollections, or interviews) to encourage the client to tell their own stories. The approach is subjective, and this results in more useful and deeper evaluation of the causes of his tension. The deeper insight garnered is necessary because human are complex, and the source of workplace tension might really be something more deep-seated than it appears to be at first glance.

The qualitative assessment and subjective component of MST " emphasizes the counselling relationship rather than the delivery of the service," engaging the client to draw his " constellation of influence via a step-by-step process" (Patton & McMahon, 2006: 165). MST helps ensure that all the aspects that influence a person's life that affect his behaviour at work are brought to light, analyzed, and used to provide an effective solution to his workplace tension. Traditional and quantitative methods may easily miss this. The MST theory therefore is the best theory to address workplace tension because it takes into account the complexity of people.

References:

Patton, W. & McMahon, M. (2006) " The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development and Counselling: Connecting Theory and Practice," International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 28 (2): 153-166

Patton, W. & McMahon, M. (1998) Development and System Theory, Wadsworth Publishing; 1st edition