

## **Upsurge in Temporary Staffing Brings More Complexity to the Workplace**

***By Leslie Fox***

The news service Reuters reported on November 5, 2010 that “another large jump in U.S. temporary help payrolls last month, coming amid the strongest private hiring since April, suggests U.S. employers increasingly prefer to take on contingent or contract workers as an alternative to permanent hiring”. While it is a good sign that managers are using temporary workers to better manage workload fluctuations as the slow recovery starts to take hold, at the same time, they must anticipate the human side of bringing temporary workers into their organizations and be aware that a three-way employment relationship is very complex. These relationships require especially careful delineation at the contracting phase. How does one assure that a contract for temporary services addresses the complexity of the relationship?

### **Preparing for the Human Side of a Contract**

A backlog in claims processing at an insurance company prompted the department’s manager to contract with a staffing company for temporary claims specialists. Clear communications were essential from the beginning. The manager needed to communicate detailed information to a staffing company’s account manager, i.e., the scope of the assignment, including the volume and type of claims to be processed, the work environment, and the electronic tools required, as well as the client’s expectations for working hours, productivity, and data quality standards. The claims processing manager also needed to understand the needs of the temporary workers to be successful—the needs for adequate selection, orientation, supervision and feedback.

The staffing company's account manager needed to clearly describe the engagement to the temporary claims specialists who were being assigned to help the client. Contracts with the client and work assignment forms for the temporary workers had to be written clearly to assure that all of the necessary information was properly communicated. In addition, live human interaction, either face to face or on the telephone, had to supplement written documents. How many relationship triangles can you identify in this example? Have you experienced this kind of complexity in your own company’s temporary staffing contracting process?

When people are pressured for time and have ready access to electronic means of communication, they may fail to have sufficient person-to-person dialogue. In a three-way relationship the failure to communicate well can be disastrous. Verbally reviewing documents together is essential to confirm that the necessary level of understanding is present before the engagement begins. “Being aware is more important than being smart,” writes Phil Jackson, former coach of the Chicago Bulls and author of a book about his coaching philosophy called “Sacred Hoops.” Jackson’s statement is a nice starting point from which to discuss the three-way staffing relationships (client manager/staffing firm

manager/staffing firm employees) that are so common in the new work environment and how they are affected by emotional process in the workplace.

### **An Emotional System**

In today's business organizations, many tasks and functions are accomplished through temporary or permanent outsourcing arrangements such as those described in this example. All parties to these relationships can benefit from being more aware of the emotional side of the work they do together, i.e., the patterns of behaviors that occur in relationships as individuals join, work in, or leave an organization. We call this "emotional process" in the workplace.

Our discussion of emotional process is based on Bowen family systems theory, a theory of human behavior that applies to the functioning of families and other social groups. Dr. Murray Bowen noted that when a group of people come together to achieve a common goal, they eventually begin to function as a unit, or an "emotional system." The emotional system operates like a mobile. When you pull on one piece of the mobile, all the other pieces shift. This happens to people too when they all work together. The word "emotional" refers to the automatic responses that individuals have to one another. When we feel as though we are operating on automatic pilot at work, we are caught up in the system's "emotional process."

It is important to develop an awareness of emotional process in your workplace, because with heightened awareness, the behavior patterns become observable and predictable. We can then modify our own behavior when we are more acutely aware of the impact we have on each other. When individuals within the system are functioning at a high level, they are clear about their responsibilities and expectations, and their behavior is more likely to be purposeful and less automatic or reactive to the other people around them. Relationships thrive on such clarity, and effective leadership emerges from it.

### **Facts vs. Feelings**

When individuals in the organization respond to each other based on the facts of a situation, everything functions more effectively. When responsibilities and expectations are vague, conflicting or simply unknown, the workplace becomes "anxious." The parties are reactive and people speak in terms of how they "feel" rather than how they "think." Open and honest communication is always important but not always easy. It is even more important and complicated between the three parties in a temporary staffing relationship, which is why careful documentation of the needs and responsibilities of each party should be carefully spelled out in the contract.

### **Anxiety has an Impact on Performance**

The failure to take time to communicate effectively is one symptom of an anxious work system. Anxiety is contagious. It spreads from person to person and from department to department throughout the organization. An anxious claims processing department may be in a highly reactive mode because it has been "infected" by the anxiety of others in the company. The sources of anxiety in organizations vary. Anxious behavior may be the result of a major organizational trauma, such as a merger, acquisition or downsizing. It may be due to temporary stress, such as an upcoming shareholders' meeting. Whatever the source of the anxiety, the effectiveness of individuals is influenced by how well they can manage their own reactivity in a highly anxious work system. Some symptoms of anxiety include:

- poor performance
- tardiness
- excessive absenteeism
- disruptive conflicts with others
- not allowing enough time to talk through important issues
- gossiping
- blaming
- cliques

If leaders can recognize these behaviors as symptoms of anxiety and can manage their own anxiety in response to stress, the staff calms down, because being calm is also contagious. This, of course, is easy to say, but not so easy to practice.

### **Calm Presence Is Important**

A critically important contribution consultants and temporary staff can make when working with a client organization or company is to be a calm presence. The ability to maintain a calm approach to problem-solving ripples out toward the leaders and others in the client organization, and everyone begins to function more effectively. It has been the authors' experience that when a workplace is less anxious, performance improves, solutions appear and problems suddenly seem more manageable. Calmer clients usually find their own solutions. In a three-way staffing relationship, all parties can influence organizational functioning by being calm, thoughtful, and increasing their own awareness of emotional process in the workplace, while taking deliberate action in the best interest of the company. The greatest challenge we face today is creating time to be thoughtful, managing our own anxiety and promoting calm behavior. Take time out of your day to assess your reactivity to the emotionality in your workplace and develop a plan to be a calmer presence in that system.