

How do molehills grow into mountains?

We've used football and tennis to dramatise how people affect organisations. With the usual warning that you can push these comparisons too far, let's move on to cricket and ask... How do molehills grow into mountains?

Maybe you're not a cricket fan. Let's go back in time and look at what happened in the third test match during Pakistan's last tour of England.

The umpire accused the Pakistan team of cheating and gave five runs to England as a penalty. At first Pakistan played on. During a break they decided to protest by coming on late for the next session. By the time they got back on the pitch, the umpires refused to "play ball". They said that Pakistan's lateness meant they'd forfeited the game. So England were awarded the win; the first time this has happened in 129 years of international cricket.

Imagine this situation translated to work terms. A manager suspects a person is doing something wrong: anything from being lazy to raiding the petty cash. Now see how an incompetent manager escalates the situation until the whole place grinds to a halt.

Here are the 8 tactics to make a crisis out of a drama...

Jump in before you have the evidence

The cricket umpire saw that the ball had been damaged in a way which would help Pakistan's bowlers. Did he see someone damaging it? Did he check on other explanations for the damage (for instance, England's Kevin Pietersen had smashed the ball around a bit and it might have hit an advertising hoarding)?

In this case we don't know yet. But the rule is: when you're addressing a difficult issue, you're like a witness in a court case. State what you've seen and know. If you're acting on hearsay, say so. Let the other person give his/her side of things.

Forget any past history

If the manager and the person under suspicion have locked horns before, the manager might have to delegate the task...or prepare for the accusation of bias. The umpire in the test match was widely disliked by Asian teams. They'd complained about him before. As soon as he accused them of cheating, lots of memories came flooding back.

Don't be precise about your accusation too early

Is what the manager says what the employee hears? Indeed, if the manager is uncomfortable, has he/she made his/her accusation clear? Does it stick to the facts? In the cricket case, the umpire could have said: "The ball has been damaged; how did that happen?" or, arguably: "I understand that tampering with the ball goes on, but I'm going to have to penalise you: please have a strong word with whichever one of you did this."

The Pakistani team heard "You're all cheats." Unsurprisingly they got riled.

Do it in public

Of course! If you're going to give someone a roasting (or even try to find out if they've done something wrong) do it in front of their colleagues – or, in the case of a cricket ground, a few thousand spectators. That'll heat things up!

Be judge and jury

The umpire not only accused them of cheating but found them guilty and gave five runs to the other side. Maybe in sports this is OK. The umpire or referee has to act quickly to get the game going. In business you're upping the ante and creating a situation where it's your word against theirs.

Act immediately

....make your mind up in the emotional heat of the moment! Say what first comes into your head!

In fact, the Pakistani team showed a huge degree of maturity by initially playing on. But once in the dressing room they obviously whipped themselves into an emotional state.

Ignore what's at stake

Pakistan had lost the series. They were getting criticised at home. But they looked like they were going to win the match and take some of the heat off them. At that point they're accused of cheating.

The higher the stakes, the more emotional the reaction. If someone's job is on the line, don't expect a cool and reasonable response!

Act like children

"We're not playing because you called us names," said the Pakistani team

"We're not umpiring because it's a precedent," said the umpires in the end.

Both sides have their points; but they weren't exactly helping the paying spectators and the players from both sides who wanted to get on with the game.

When a manager and a colleague throw their toys out of the pram, it doesn't help create a motivated work atmosphere.

There's plenty of advice about the legal aspects of difficult staff relations. But a good manager (and a professional employee) looks at the psychological aspects of those difficult work situations before anyone mentions the word "tribunal".

And one way of preparing for the time when your work relationships are put under strain is to know a bit more about each others personalities and behaviour. Done professionally, you might be able to avoid these situations altogether. Thomas International can help here. Now, does anyone know the number of the Test and County Cricket Board?