

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE

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WATER WARS

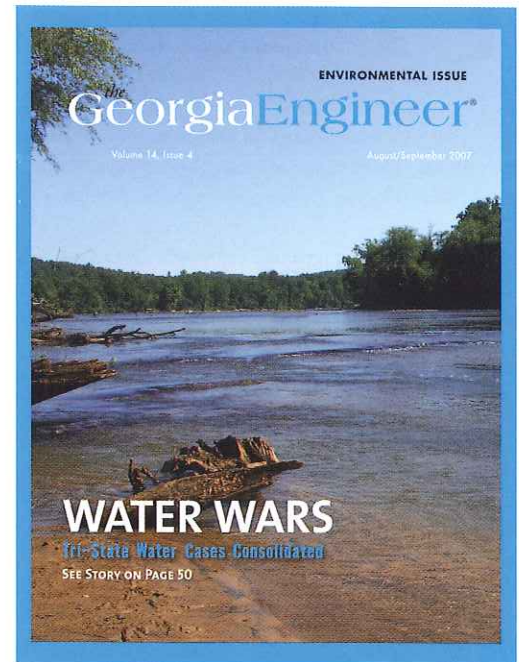
Tri-State Water Cases Consolidated

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Seventeen years of disputes between Georgia, Florida, and Alabama have resulted in five different lawsuits being presented in four different courts. But there is cause for hope: four of the five cases have recently been consolidated and will be heard soon in one location. Will the Water Wars finally come to an end?



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Handling Project Conflict

Dr. Ruth Middleton House • President • Middleton-House & Company

It's hard to imagine an environmental project without conflict. In any project, for that matter, conflict is unavoidable; in fact, it only becomes more toxic when people try to avoid it. Just the same, relationships may become strained and even break under the pressure. And damaged relationships put the project at risk, too. All projects are subject to the Fatal Law of Gravity: When you are down, everything falls on you. You can minimize damage to yourself, to your team, and to your project if you:

- Lower your residual stress levels so that "one more thing" isn't "one thing too many."
- Increase your capacity to manage stress in the midst of a conflict and still stay on top of the day to day work.
- Build skills to handle conflict in a highly charged situation: de-fuse the situation, then resolve the issue.

Lower your residual stress level. Lowering your own stress increases the odds you'll become a part of a solution rather than an added part of the problem. When your ongoing residual stress level is low it is less likely that one more thing will be one thing too many. And the signals you get from your body are often early warning devices telling you to get the stress under control. Dr. David Edelberg puts it this way:

Since symptoms-as-messages are only trying to help, they require a good listener (you and, with luck, your doctor) in order to be understood. In this light, symptoms of stress, whether anxiety or headaches, anger or fatigue, are all, in a peculiar way, gifts... (The Triple Whammy Cure, New York: Free Press, 2006. pp. 198-200)

Dr. Edelberg goes on to recommend that people under stress keep a stress journal to help them listen to their symptoms, recognize the sources of stress in their lives, and decide how to deal with the stress—how to cope with it or walk away from it.

It's possible to anticipate and then manage the stress without journals or other devices. Just listen to your own body. Notice when your body tells you that stress is on the way. Usually, your body knows you're headed for trouble before your brain does. Listen to it. How does it signal you when you imagine coming face-to-face with someone you dread seeing?

That signal is an early warning device to get your stress level down and keep your own behavior (including what you say) in check. It's time to give yourself a stress break. Don't let the situation pressure you into doing or saying something you'll regret later.

If you can excuse yourself, a 15-minute walk can work wonders. Some doctors say a walk should be the most-prescribed "medicine." If it is awkward to leave the scene, try this deep breathing exercise on the spot. Repeat the sequence below three times. Don't leave your hands dangling when you do a deep breathing exercise—it's not good for your circulation. Either rest your hands in your lap, on the arms of your chair, or on the table in front of you.

*Breathe in to the count of three.
Hold for the count of twelve.
Breathe out for the count of six.*

Of course, it would be great to do this deep breathing activity in a dark room with only soothing music or sounds of nature in the background. But it can also help on-the-spot in the middle of a surprise conflict situation.



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Increase your capacity to manage stress. One way to free up capacity is to choose not to get upset about some things. Know what your stress triggers are and disconnect some of them. Much unproductive conflict ensues, for example, when people work through a problem at a different pace.

When there is an event, some people achieve awareness of it immediately. Others simply just don't get it. You can probably find many examples of this in your relationship with a significant other. He doesn't get what he said that insulted you; she doesn't get that you need some space. Well, the same thing happens at work; it is just often more subtle. Choose not to get upset here. Use a "When...then..." statement to shed light on the problem without accusing or cajoling.

Even when all parties to a conflict are aware of the problem, each one will take action at a different pace. It's easy to take one person's quick response as "jumping off the deep end" and slowing down for another person's measured pace may seem like "watching paint dry." When you are past ready and you feel others are dragging their feet, make the same choice. If you can allow the time the other person needs, just do it. But go ahead and set a time and a date to deal with it later.

After action, there should be relief. But even at this point, watch what you say. "Thank you," "Great job," "Way to go" are all good options. "I see you finally..." is not. That comment would just create another event.

Build skills to handle conflict in a highly charged situation. Think of yourself as a lightning rod. Your job in a conflict is to take the charge out of the air and ground it—other people don't get burned and neither do you.

Remember you can support the other person even if you don't agree with his or her idea. You can help the most if you

1. Are predictably present and accessible.

Often people are not as insistent on hav-

ing their own way as we might expect; but they almost always want to be seen and heard before a decision is made.

2. Give the other person two-thirds of the available time to talk while you listen. You can be explicit about the time limits. If you only have five minutes before you must leave for a meeting, say so. Then let the other person have two thirds of that time to lay the problem out.
3. Put everything but the other person "on hold" for that period of time.
5. Listen with the intent to summarize the factual and the feeling content of the message.
5. Actually feed back the factual and the feeling content of the person's message, "Sounds like you feel...because..."

Allow some time for what the person said to sink in before you make a decision, give advice, or express an opinion. The stronger the person's feelings, the more time you should allow. It may even be appropriate to save your reaction for a later, planned meeting. (But go ahead and set the time for that meeting now—you don't want to be seen as causing an unnecessary delay.)

We can no longer dismiss managing work stress and job conflict as "touchy-feely" or "nice to have." These things affect not only the quality of your life but also the length of your life. Work in America, the stunning report on a joint study by MIT and HEW, established that job satisfaction was the strongest predictor of long life.

In an impressive 15-year study of aging, the strongest predictor of longevity was work satisfaction. The second best predictor was overall "happiness." These two socio-psychological measures predicted longevity better than a rating by an examining physician of physical functioning, or a

measure of the use of tobacco, or genetic inheritance. Controlling these other variables statistically did not alter the dominant role of work satisfaction.

The message—loud and clear—is: control this factor. Control your stress and your satisfaction at work. Important steps to gain control include:

- Lower your residual stress levels.*
- Increase your capacity to manage stress.*
- Build skills to handle conflict in a highly charged situation.*



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