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Discord spills over: Workers quit talking to each other

The Spokesman-Review

Sometimes subordinates get bruised when bosses punch each other.

So it was when Stevens County Prosecutor Tim Rasmussen and now-retired Superior Court Judge Rebecca Baker battled over perceived conflicts of interest.

Lloyd Nickel, the county's chief civil deputy prosecutor, and Evelyn Bell, the Superior Court administrator, wound up in a secondary bout that has outlasted the main event.

Although they considered themselves friends, they were loyal to their bosses and wound up in a personal conflict that has little to do with either of them.

The issue that divides Bell and Nickel should be easy for dispassionate legal professionals to resolve: Was dedicated law library money improperly spent for online legal database access in the prosecutor's office?

The dispute offered little reason for passion. County law libraries aren't much used because most lawyers do their research online in their offices.

In more than a decade, no one had questioned whether a 1998 decision to divert money to online research satisfied the state requirement to provide service to "the judges of the state, to state and county officials, and to members of the bar."

Nevertheless, Nickel felt Baker impugned his integrity in a meeting a year ago with Rasmussen and county commissioners. He blamed Bell, who wasn't present at the meeting, for reporting the alleged misuse of funds to Baker.

Bell's duties include being the law librarian and paying library bills. She said her belated discovery that she had been approving payments for online legal research in the prosecutor's office was coincidental.

"It's a shame, but I did what I felt was right at the time," Bell said.

She thought the issue might have been resolved without a blowup, but Rasmussen and Baker dug in their heels.

"All the tempers flared and, to this day, Lloyd and I don't speak," Bell said.

"It's pathetic," Nickel said.