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*“If you’re going to fight,  
would you take it outside the room?”*

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Trying not to disturb anyone else, I’ve made my way quietly over to the source of what’s disturbing me. Quietly and carefully, trying not to trip over the protruding metal feet of the temporary cubicle dividers, each of which stands at a slight but unique tilt. The collective effect is slightly nauseating: My eye can’t find a true vertical anywhere, nor even an untrue consensus. But having emerged from on-site storage, these well-worn, dusty, olive-green office furnishings came at the right time and the right price for the proposal: immediately and zero, respectively.

In just a few days this short-term rental space has been transformed from ugly empty space into ugly working space. The walls still need painting; the permanently off-kilter venetian blinds still need fixing; the carpet still needs cleaning. Or fumigating. But we have work spaces for everyone.

An adjoining room houses the three production staff and their tables, computers, printers, and secure shredding box. This main room houses the technical writers, editors/writers, and proposal manager, and also provides occasional work space for those who come and go:

- Project accountants pressed into service as proposal costers
- Technical experts on loan from existing projects
- Corporate honchos on flying trips

Cubicles line its perimeter; one wall holds a stained whiteboard, a victim of too many encounters with regular markers; a banged-up pressed-wood table and cast-off chairs (*No two alike! Each one unique!*) sit in the centre, ready for meetings.

Each cubicle is one desk long, one desk wide and one desk-plus-chair-plus-three-inches deep. It’s . . . cozy. But it’s better than working around a conference table, which is what we did last time. Blocking our view of our neighbours, this configuration gives the illusion of privacy and helps most of us concentrate. The fabric of the dividers also muffles any muttering. Any whimpering.

But it can’t sufficiently muffle yelling. I had let it go for a while and then decided it wasn’t going to resolve itself. I’d have asked the proposal manager to take action, but he’s one of the yellers.

The combatants are nose-to-nose. They’re not quite flailing, but I stop an arm’s-length away anyway, not wanting to get into the middle of something that looks like it could turn physical at any moment. I’ve given some thought to my objective, and have decided not to try to effect a resolution of the content of their dispute. Merely its relocation.

I speak quietly. Discreetly, you know?

*“If you’re going to fight,  
would you take it outside the room?”*

They turn as one to look at me, baffled.

*“WE’RE NOT FIGHTING,”*  
shouts one.

*“WE’RE DISCUSSING,”*  
shouts the other.

I look at these two retired colonels: one Army, one Air Force.

*“Well, then,  
could you discuss  
A LITTLE MORE QUIETLY?”*

Two sets of eyes roll. But as I make my way back to my own space, I note that their volume has dropped. I also note that it must be almost time for our daily 2PM meeting. The aroma of stale grease has finally wiggled its way up from the restaurant eight floors below us, as it does every weekday after lunch.

Talk about your nauseating.