

Leading Ways: COMFORTABLE WITH CONFLICT

We all know that conflict is an inevitable part of life, and as such it finds its way into the lives we lead at our organizations. Most people do not mind a little disagreement and tension at work, in fact some of this give and take helps create good outcomes by challenging ideas, inventing new approaches, and avoiding 'groupthink'. But few of us would want to live in an environment that is continually contentious.

Some conflict comes from competing interests; me, my idea or my team versus you, your idea or your team. Getting these interests aligned can be challenging and generate conflict but is always a positive step toward achieving organizational progress.

Most of the conflict that I see between individuals and groups comes when interests are aligned, or easily could be, but there is a misunderstanding of roles and goals. This usually stems from a combination of poor communication, lack of a general perspective, not enough focus on process, and a lot of tension from poorly resolved conflict in the past with its attendant hurt feelings and vendettas. Engaging and addressing all of these can go a long way to removing avoidable conflicts, managing conflicts once they start and leaving more time, energy, good will and enough relationship capital to work through the conflicts that are tougher and more vexing.

There are three dimensions of focus that can help leaders manage conflict. Let's take a look at each in more detail below.

PREVENTION

In many instances a little more awareness and action toward anticipating and avoiding conflict will reduce the chance that it erupts later. Here are four things that can help:

- 1. Build positive relationships** - the stronger and deeper the relationships, the easier it will be to feel that the interaction is a discussion or difference of opinion, not a conflict that engages emotions. Keep in mind that positive relationships are built upon the qualities of open, supportive, and mutually respectful interactions. This won't work with everyone, but a lot of the daily tensions around conflict will go down if you build these elements into your relationships.
- 2. Begin new working relationships with a "level set"** conversation that includes the following elements. First, what is your and their leadership or work **style**? When are you most comfortable? Do you prefer the big picture or the details? Are you extroverted or more reflective? Do you like work that is planned or emergent? A second dimension to share in the level set is **communication**. Good questions to ask are: What needs to be communicated? How often should communication occur? What medium is to be used (face

to face, text, email)? The level set should also include how each of you like to give and get **feedback** about the project as well as your individual work. Conflicts will still arise so how will you and your partners **make decisions** and how should you engage each other when this needs to change?

3. Even with the level set conversation, new work relationships and projects may still have bumps arise along the way.. Something has come to your attention that seems out of the pattern of expectations and it bothers you. Instead of acting in ignorance you will want to convene a **“reset” conversation**. It might even be a good idea to tag this as inevitable back during the level set chat. In this conversation you want to reaffirm the relationship and how it has grown, share your sense of the mutual progress and then raise the issue without judgment or blame. Your stance is curiosity and a check in to see if they see and feel some or all of this themselves. Be prepared here to offer your experience and interpretation, not conclusion. Once some common understanding has been established, move to exploring the root cause of the issue. As the driver of the discomfort has surfaced it is time to turn to remedies and commitments from both sides.
4. Throughout this pre-conflict period, you want to remember to **remain mindful and curious**. Mindful to see and listen to yourself and others so that you are engaged beyond first appearances. And curious so that you eschew judgment to get to useful and productive engagement.

IN THE STORM

All of this prevention will reduce the amount of conflict and in general leave you better prepared to deal with it. But conflict will still arise, and you will find yourself **in the storm** here are some steps to call on to make it through this passage:

1. Try to get the conflict **contained to a single issue**, so you can focus on the work that needs to be done. This is perhaps not always the most important, but usually the most immediate presenting issue. If you make some progress on the immediate, you are in a better position to work back to the most important. Next, move to some shared agreement as to how you and the other person are going to work together to address this mutual concern. You might take ten minutes in the moment to give each other some quick insight of how you see the concern or issue, but then adjourn with an agreement to meet in the next 24 hours, if possible.
2. During this break you can do three things to help keep the conflict in a **positive framework** and ensure that the most important dimensions to you as a leader are resolved to your satisfaction. First assess the situation using the Quick Six factors: power, relationship, quality, importance, time, and buy-in. Once you have the situation in hand, think critically about what outcomes are most important for you from this conflict. Then think through which strategy will best achieve this outcome.
3. Have an **exit strategy**. Conflict can happen in all three directions of our relationships - up, out and down. The approach for exiting will be different and will vary by personalities as well. But thinking through what to say to get to a “cooling off place” and having the words

at the ready will leave you more at ease. Think these through with an actual person in mind and what you would say if you felt emotions welling up and matters seem to be about to get out of control. The words should be ones that you are comfortable with, which are positive and proactive and do not pass judgment on the person with whom you are in conflict, even if it seems they might deserve it.

For example, let's say you have a conflict with a peer at work that has gotten a bit heated or emotional. For a good exit, you might say - "Excuse me. I am feeling a little uncomfortable with the way this discussion has been going for the past few minutes. Our working together is valuable to me, and this work is important to us both. I know I will be able to engage better if we stop for today and get back to it tomorrow or ASAP." In the interim you think through the source of the discomfort and come to some better understanding of its impact on you. At the next meeting start by apologizing for having to stop the meeting before and then say. "The break has given me some time to understand why I was uncomfortable, and I'd like to share this with you" and share what it was without accusing them of things. A difficult path to walk, but easier if you set it up as something you want to explore with them together.

BUILDING IN THE AFTERMATH

After we get through a conflict situation we have been dreading, the last thing that most of us want to do is to re-engage with the person we've conflicted with. But if we don't do this, we leave valuable leadership capital on the table.

- 1.** The first step is to **stay engaged** with the situation mentally. Access what progress and positive outcomes were achieved in the situation, task or problem you were working on. Also consider any positive changes in the relationship with the person or team you have conflicted with. In this assessment try to understand the situation from your and their vantage point and surface any new or unresolved emotional concerns from the last interaction.
- 2. Connect soon** with the individual or team that has been party to the conflict. This should not be more than a week to ten days and should be as informal as you can manage. If asked what this is about, respond by saying, "I think that situation was hard and that we all did some good work, I'd like to make sure we all learn from it and take advantage of the lessons as we go forward." During the meeting you want to share some of your thoughts from your assessment above: what was accomplished, what you learned, what you felt good about, how you understand them differently, what you will do differently, etc. Invite them to offer input on your assessment as well as their own perspectives about what happened. If ideas for improved actions, such as different ways of communicating or making decisions emerge, make a plan and commitment to follow through with working differently from both sides. Try to avoid rehashing past problems and focus on the positive new approach as you go forward.
- 3.** As you move forward, **demonstrate good faith**, by doing your share, affirming shared interests and values, celebrating the success along the way and behave in ways that demonstrate that you value the relationship. If you have discussed the "reset" meeting mentioned above, it's a good time to have that shared expectation.

We can all be more effective leaders as we make the inevitable conflict more constructive and productive. Our comfort with it, rather than our denial is a good first practice.