

Facing today's need for much more constructive conflict

Many leaders, managers, supervisors, and employees have become conflict-averse. They shy away from conflict, feel uncomfortable about "going against the grain", rocking the boat, or being perceived as a "trouble-maker," not being a "team player."

Does constructive conflict even exist in your organization, your department, on your team, in your silo or in your group? Or, do you lead, manage or supervise in an environment where "We're one big, happy family.", where all are in agreement, always smiling and saying "yes"?

If you're not experiencing constructive conflict in your workplace, you're most likely not making high-quality decisions; nor are you encouraging your colleagues to be committed to implementing the decisions you are making.

The habit of aversion to conflict

Much of today's resistance to conflict has to do with folks who, when growing up, were subject to consistent loud arguments and fights between their parents, primary care-givers, relatives or friends. As a result, they grew to become fearful and scared when folks raised their voices in argument, dissent, and disagreement. Now, as adults, many still resist conflict as, often unconsciously, their childhood fear and terror leak out in workplace situations where conflict arises.

In the workplace, and elsewhere in life, they therefore do whatever they can to avoid conflict of any kind. They defer, become quiet, accommodate others, and consistently nod in agreement. They "go along to get along," and opt to be silent when facing real or potential conflict. They see "conflict" as "bad" and threatening. Avoiding conflict has become a knee-jerk reaction in much of our society.

Why constructive conflict matters

Constructive conflict not only is a requirement for optimizing the decision-making process, but as leaders, managers and supervisors, you have a responsibility to foster dissent in your organization, on your team or in your department. Conflict is often the genesis of creativity. It's how you surface problems and sources of dissent before that cause far worse issues. It's how you get people engaged. No conflict, no passion. All that "niceness" can leave people feeling little or no interest in the outcome.

The purpose of fostering constructive conflict is to have everyone put all their cards on the table, dissent, disagree, diverge, be "ambiguous", be inconsistent with "conventional wisdom" and be out in the open with their views or perspectives — regardless of their role, position, or place in the hierarchy. In an environment of constructive conflict, ideas can be refuted, disagreed with, countered, but cannot be silenced, cut off or shut down.

There's a lot of noise, excitement, passion, and involvement — but *nobody gets hurt*.

Defining *constructive* conflict

The most fundamental aspect of constructive conflict is to create a safe and trusting environment where all are heard in order to enhance the decision-making process and garner buy-in and commitment from the participants for implementing decisions.

Constructive conflict is open, allowing, accepting, and non-judgmental for "the good of the order." It focuses on ideas, not personalities. It allows for disagreement and follows ground rules for interacting that are mutually respectful. Constructive conflict fosters and encourages divergent and lateral thinking and varied perspectives. It typically takes place in a "living laboratory" where folks are learning how to engage

in constructive conflict and learning about themselves in the process, so that is can be intentional about repairing any damaged relationships that may arise or result from the process.

Conflict is fair where all are heard and all ideas are considered, even though not everyone may be "satisfied" with ultimate decision; where it is open and transparent, holds people accountable for their role in the process, and supports the process of relationship building and meaningful dialogue. When implemented appropriately, it fosters commitment and collaboration., and acts as a process to drive change where all parties are "drivers, not passengers".

Engaging people who are resistant

How do you generate dissent or disagreement when a some folks prefer the status quo?

One strategy to involve resistant folks in constructive conflict is to appoint (and allow) them to be "contrarian." You can ask, encourage and allow them to take an opposite viewpoint, to play "devil's advocate" and speak to an issue from a different perspective. You can ask folks to play the role of "your competition" and present a conflicting view that your competitors might take. You might ask others to explore "what if" scenarios, no matter how "off the wall" they are.

It's important not only to include all necessary players in the decision-making process, but to be sure to cover all the decision-making bases even though some folks initially may feel uncomfortable or experience some unease in the process. It's important that folks not be seen, or made to be seen as "bad" or "wrong" but as valuable contributors. It's also critical to create a safe and trusting environment where folks can open up and say what's on their mind without fearing ostracism, reprisal or unfair personal judgments or criticism.

Questions for self-reflection

- How do you, personally and professionally, feel about conflict? Good, bad, indifferent? Why?
- Do you encourage others to be "contrarian", to "argue the "opposing side", etc.? Are you open to divergent thinking? If not, why not?
- What was your experience with conflict as you were growing up?
- Do you ever take the "other side" to positively and thoughtfully further a discussion or decision-making process?
- What is the culture in your organization, in your team or department around conflict, or constructive conflict?
- Are you always or usually an "I'm right" individual at work, (at home or at play)? Are you a good listener?
- Do you see conflict as an opportunity?
- Do you shy away from, avoid or resist conflict at all costs?
- Does your need to achieve at work foster collaboration or conflict with others?
- Does your organization provide training in conflict resolution? If not, why not?
- What was the latest conflict in which you were involved that was resolved constructively? What was your role?
- When engaged in a conflict, are you able to separate personalities from issues?

When faced with conflict, it's important to be conscious and aware of the dynamic that is playing out and know that fear around conflict at work is most probably "old stuff" that is coming up. Working on this fear and resistance with a qualified coach or counselor can bring one to move through their childhood fear, understand what it is and choose to engage in conflict without fear of reprisal, of being "bad" or "wrong", or being physically or verbally "hurt" in some way, shape or form.

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