

Using Team Conflicts

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"It's important to talk to people in their own language. If you say it well, they'll say, 'Wow, he said exactly what I was thinking.' And when they begin to respect you, they'll follow you to the death." Lee Iacocca (former CEO of Chrysler)

Conflict is too often viewed as something groups should avoid. When we normally think of conflict, we visualize people arguing, fighting, name-calling, and/or stress and tension.

Conflict can start with a simple misunderstanding or lack of clarity in our communication. As leaders, when we take the time to speak their language, we reduce the potential for conflict.

Although conflict can be produced in negative ways, there are many positive benefits **creative conflict** can produce for groups. To earn these *'benefits,'* a group must be ready to face **creative conflict** squarely. Our purpose here is to outline how groups can benefit from **creative conflict** by identifying key conflicts early and avoiding some common pitfalls in discussion.

Benefits of creative conflict

Dealing openly with group conflict has several *'positive'* and healthy benefits for the team and its members:

Improve the group's solution

Conflict can help the group produce *'better answers'* because conflict can force groups to confront possible defects or challenges in a solution. Conflict can help group members analyze the specifics of any group's goals, procedures, and solutions to ensure that the best choice for the group is selected.

An absence of conflict in a group decision-making process might be the result of *'group think.'* This 'group think' pitfall has destroyed the creativity, innovation and progress of more groups, companies and organizations than you could imagine. By allowing **creative conflict** to enter a group decision-making process, the group is more likely to analyze the potential solutions to help in choosing the best solution for the group's needs.

Productivity

Managing conflict helps reduce the amount of time wasted on solutions that are not as effective and that might have a negative effect on the group's productivity. By avoiding conflict, group members are more likely to become distant or withdraw from the group and begin to slack off -- having a negative effect on group productivity.

The sad thing is this happens under the surface at first and by the time it comes to light it is *almost* too late for the leader to resolve. Keeping conflict and its resolution open and transparent is the secret to keeping people involved and committed. Don't hide it or run from it. As the leader,

recognize it, delve deeper into it, or investigate to make sure you know all the details and then deal with it openly and honestly.

Organizational change

Creative conflict helps identify potential problems resulting from procedures, assignments, and responsibilities within groups. By allowing conflict to surface in a group, the group might find that the specific rules and procedures for doing things aren't working or might not be best suited for the group members. Sometimes they are having a detrimental effect on the group.

Allowing for healthy **creative conflict** will allow a group the opportunity to change itself to obtain a better more creatively functioning group.

Awareness

Creative conflict allows individuals to learn more about their own personal conflict style (how they deal with conflict and how they bring it to the table). By identifying and understanding their own conflict style, individuals can learn the strengths and weaknesses associated with their particular style.

This awareness allows group members the opportunity to learn how their creative conflict style affects others, which helps individuals learn how to anticipate and resolve future conflict situations.

As a leader, this can be invaluable in knowing your own creative conflict style and the styles of those on your teams as well. It will help in finding solutions and coming to a consensus and agreement on resolution.

Personal Development

Creative conflict teaches individuals which conflict styles might be more appropriate in various conflict situations. By dealing with conflict, individuals can begin to learn how to use other conflict styles to produce better resolutions to group conflict. Knowing what works and what hurts can be an invaluable tool for you as a leader. The wisdom is in knowing and using them appropriately.

Psychological maturity

Managing creative conflict often helps individuals to become better at learning or exploring how to take the perspectives of others. By learning how to take the perspective of others, individuals become better at anticipating conflict and concern others might have in the future.

Morale

Addressing creative conflicts allow group members to vent their emotions, release stress, and reduce tensions. By facing conflict together, group members have the potential to become closer to other group members, which can have a positive overall effect on the group's morale.

Detecting conflicts

There are several helpful techniques that allow groups to identify potential conflicts among their members.

These techniques include:

Straw poll

A straw poll is a non-binding vote on a proposal to determine the level of agreement of the individuals within the group. Straw polls have a few drawbacks: it might cause group thinking to occur, suppress viewpoints that are in the minority, provide the sense of discord, or cause others to feel excluded from the group.

Often, straw polls work best AFTER the group has, at least briefly, discussed concerns of the proposal. When conducting a straw poll, individuals should not be counting who is for or against a specific proposal.

Round robin

A round-robin is designed to allow everyone in the room a moment to speak. In a go-round, *each individual* is yielded the floor to discuss the topic at hand. In a go-round, *each individual* states a position and explains their reasoning behind their position.

Round-robins are very effective for allowing equal time to all individuals in the group. This is especially beneficial for hearing the opinions of quieter group members who often refrain from speaking in an open, unstructured discussion. As a leader make sure they are engaged and share from their perspective. They might have the secret.

Small Group Discussion

Depending on the size of your group, sometimes it would be beneficial to break the group into smaller group discussions to allow individuals to express their ideas and concerns.

A small group discussion is beneficial when a group is large, pressed for time, and wants to explore the various views of the group. After small group discussion occurs, a member from each group summarizes their discussion to provide the larger group with an understanding of the various positions and ideas within the group. Small group discussions allow for a group to generate various positions available on a topic and help to lead discussions about the various concerns and issues raised by group members.

Fishbowl

After various positions from group members have been identified, a fishbowl can be used to explore the ideas and concerns related to each position. In a fishbowl, representatives for each position are chosen to represent and explain their position and answer any concerns related to this position.

A fishbowl is designed arranged to avoid repetitive arguments from appearing and to expedite the discussion.

A fishbowl is beneficial because it allows all positions to be discussed without having to have everyone in the room overlap their ideas with everyone else.

A fishbowl allows for a condensing the time discussing an issue but does not sacrifice the quality of the discussion.

HP uses something like this as a creative exercise in their corporate culture. They divide their teams into two smaller teams who research a challenge and then come back and advocate their solution. Then a vote is taken on which decision is the better one.

Pitfalls of conflict resolution

Keep in mind that there are some pitfalls in the resolution process in dealing effectively with conflict in any situation. The road is not always clear and has a few potholes or pitfalls to be aware of when navigating towards a solution or resolution.

Here are some areas (pit falls) to be kept in mind:

Working on problems that are too general, too large, or not well-defined

Problems that are too general are vague or void in the specifics needed to generate any potential solutions. Working on problems that are too large for the group to handle often results in frustration by the group.

Ill-defined problems are difficult to discuss in any detail. Problems that are either too general, too large, or ill-defined will make discussing the problem and finding solutions difficult and frustrating. Work to break down the problems into manageable, discussion-able pieces.

See **‘Why Didn’t I THINK of That?’** for some specific suggestions on how to do this.

Jumping to a solution before really analyzing the problem

Sometimes groups will accept a solution before determining what are the aspects of the specific problem. They often stop at the first *‘right’* answer or the first one that fits. This is troublesome because without understanding the entirety of the problem, there is no way to adequately and to accurately assess the suitability, cost, or application of the proposed solution. Often, this pitfall occurs when groups are pressed for time.

Failing to involve critical group members when identifying potential solutions

Although group members do not need to be present when every decision is being made, it is important for the group to determine which group members are essential for dealing with a specific problem.

A general guideline is to make sure that those individuals that are affected by the decision are present when the decision is being made. When this is not done, it will often result in those not involved in the process delaying or resisting buy-in or application. It is time well spent to ensure that

those affected are involved in the process. As a leader, this can make or break your long-term success.

Tackling problems that are ‘beyond’ the control or influence of the group itself

This pitfall occurs when a group tries to accomplish more than is possible for the group. For example, a student group tried to develop a media campaign to end bicycle related problems on campus. The group decided to develop a series of four-color posters, public service announcements, and several press releases to address this serious concern. Unfortunately, without the proper funding and contacts within various news organizations such as television stations and newspapers, the student’s campaign is not feasible. This can be seen in volunteer organizations, which have operations and members on many levels, and in various locations around the world.

Toastmasters International, for example, operates in over 143 plus countries. When members want a change, it must filter its way through the District to the International level where it may not be dealt with unless it is of importance to the organization at large and affects a large number of Districts.

Applying ‘pet’ solutions rather than seeking the ideal solution

This often occurs in groups that have people who use competitive styles of conflict management. Often, these ‘dominating’ individuals will try to impose their ‘pet’ solution and do not allow any other individual within the group to criticize the solution. Seen that all too often. ☺

The group accepts these ‘pet’ solutions, in part, as they either wish to either avoid the competitive individual or accommodate the solution. This may be because the conflict does not appear to be one that can be resolved in a collaborative or compromising fashion. Not good in the long run for the health of the group or the growth of the group.

Failing to plan adequately how to implement and evaluate the chosen solution

This pitfall occurs when groups have spent all their energies exploring the various positions and concerns related to the problem. After a long or difficult discussion of positions and concerns, group members become too tired to engage in an active discussion of how to evaluate and implement the solution.

Lots of ideas but no Ideas At Work!

The evaluation of the solution needs to be based on a set of pre-determined criteria developed by the group. In fact, this criterion is better set prior to the discussion of the challenge itself.

Implementation needs to be planned, managed, and monitored. There needs to be resources available and applied to implement the solution.

Without taking the time to properly evaluate and implement the solution, the entire process of developing a solution is virtually useless.

“Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Bob ‘Idea Man’ Hooey, DTM, PRA, CKD-Emeritus, Accredited Speaker, 2011 Spirit of CAPS recipient is an inspirational leader, speaker, and a prolific author whose works include **‘Legacy of Leadership, Strive for significance – lead on purpose!’**, **‘Speaking for Success’** and **‘The Courage to Lead!’** His articles have been featured in a multitude of North American trade and global consumer publications. He is a respected leader who has been honored by CAPS, NSA, Toastmasters, and the United Nations for his leadership contributions. His creative Ideas At Work have allowed him to travel the globe sharing insights, encouragement in 61 countries, so far. With Covid-19 he has been zooming around the globe to share his ideas. His **innovative Ideas At Work!** have been successfully applied by global leaders as well as Canada’s 50 Best Managed Companies.