

The good, the bad, and the ugly

Conflict



Because it deals with a struggle or a clash (of ideas, interests and/or persons) we often make negative associations when we hear the word *conflict* (shudder). However, conflict, in and of itself, is not “good” or “bad” (or ugly). How we qualify conflict has more to do with *what causes it* as well as *how we choose to address it*. This article will take a look at how leaders can address conflict—and make it good—as they strive to strengthen the efforts of the teams they inspire, guide and support.

Why it matters

“Concealed, avoided or otherwise ignored, conflict will likely fester only to grow into resentment, create withdrawal or cause factional infighting within an organization.” Mike Myatt

The Good

Yes, conflict can be good—and even great—for organizations. Think of the many times that a project has gotten off to a solid start because early on team members brought up concerns about estimates or assumptions that needed to be evaluated or reconsidered. How about those instances when conflict prompted reasons to question the status-quo and consider alternatives for change—a better option that had not even been on the horizon when everyone thought things were “just fine”? There have also been times when you realized that what was being done and what you expected would happen were not the same, and addressing that gap made all the difference in aligning purposes and successfully reaching deadlines and goals.

This is the type of conflict you want to encourage within your team; the conflict that revolves around **tasks**. It involves performance-oriented activities related to the

definition or content of an assignment: its direction, objective and/or the process to follow in order to complete it.

This is the kind of conflict that can inspire creativity, healthy competition and true collaboration. When team members know they have contributed to solving a problem, defining a goal or anticipating change and a new reality, the likelihood that they will not only better understand but fully support the effort is high. This will, in turn, strengthen the team and significantly benefit the process as well as the outcome. A team that deals comfortably with healthy disagreement will also vaccinate itself from the conformity and self-deception that can result from groupthink.

The Bad

While promoting task conflict is healthy, leaders should make every effort to minimize **relationship** conflict in a team. Conflict that thrives on dysfunctional personal interactions, gossiping, verbal abuse, passive/aggressive communication and overall hostility are common examples of behaviors that ignite relationship conflict which is certain to cause harm to a team. The main causes for relationship conflict include poor communication, misperception, big egos and stereotyping. Differences in values and interests can also create great divides and fuel relationship conflict.

Relationship conflict can take a serious toll on a team. According to a March 2011 survey by the accounting temporary staffing agency Accountemps, managers spend, on average, 18% (almost a day out of every work week) intervening in relationship conflicts among staff. The time that managers spend addressing relationship conflict is only part of the cost that it inflicts on your organization; absenteeism, turnover, stress, decrease in productivity, and employees' lowered sense of engagement are a few others

The Ugly

When bad conflict is allowed to fester, it will turn ugly. Rest assured—it's just a matter of time. The lack of trust and respect that result when leaders ignore or remain passive in the face of relationship conflict can slather a slick downward slope for any organization. Ignored or unaddressed conflict will undo in weeks what may have taken months or years to build. Are you willing to run that risk?

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What You Can Do

Here are some ways in which you can use your leadership skills to build a healthy conflict culture.

- **Know Yourself.** In addition to being aware of moments when anger, confusion or frustration are claiming space in your thought process, it is important to know your conflict resolution style. We generally have a natural tendency toward addressing conflict. Adapting our conflict resolution style to fit the situation will bring the best results. Do you tend to resolve conflict by competing (I win/you lose); accommodating (You win/I lose); avoiding (I won't get involved); compromising (We both win and lose); or collaborating (I win/you win)? Know your preferred style and recognize that certain situations may call for adopting a different style—even if it does not feel comfortable.
- **Engage in active listening.** Steven Covey has been quoted often: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Nothing dissipates antagonism in relationship conflict faster than evidence of empathy and willingness to understand the other person’s side of the story. Recognize and challenge your biases or assumptions. Ask open-ended questions. Clarify your understanding—and be open to being corrected.
- **Invite inclusion and don’t underestimate the power of informal opportunities for team members to get to know each other.** As we learn more about each other, we grow to appreciate each other’s diverse contributions. Employees who bring their talents and different perspectives to work together on a project or propose possible solutions will feel empowered, engaged and progressively more so. Making time to have occasional group lunches or monthly birthday celebrations can be a simple but great way for employees to interact informally while building understanding and respect.
- **Reward employees who appropriately voice their concerns or act as devils’ advocates.** Encourage discussion that is supported by facts or figures rather than opinions. Openly support informed dissent and solicit further comments. Be especially vigilant about protecting and promoting an environment where employees can safely express concerns without fear of retaliation or being ostracized (where asking questions is safe). This requires leader intentionality and resolve. Establishing ground rules on the appropriate ways that employees can manage conflict within the team is important; modeling those is essential.

If you want to focus on only one area, make that trust. You need trust as a precursor to healthy conflict. People need to be comfortable with showing their vulnerabilities—their fears, weaknesses, and mistakes—without filters. Only after having reached that comfort, can they truly engage in open dialogue. Start developing this trust in the small things and it will eventually support the larger ones.

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