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Creating an infrastructure of good conflict

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Abstract:

For some of us, the title of this paper may appear confusing. How can the words “good” and “conflict” appear together in the same title?

My experience as a mediator and an ombudsperson convinces me that the juxtaposition can indeed be justified. Not only do these two words have the potential to be used in the same sentence, I will go so far as to state that they *should* be in the same sentence.

Conflict in the workplace or almost anywhere is inevitable. We are human. We make mistakes. We annoy others. We offend others. We may be oblivious to how our behavior impacts others. We make assumptions. We are often not aware of someone’s “hot buttons,” and sometimes lack the necessary diplomacy to adequately address a challenging situation with others. We have feelings. We are emotional. We are insecure about certain matters. We often lack the confidence to address conflict, and we especially may lack the know-how to resolve conflict to a mutually beneficial result.

Yes, conflict has the potential to be disruptive; even destructive. It can easily demotivate, negatively impact the work environment, result in low morale and a toxic environment which can lead to lawsuits, all quite unwelcome outcomes.

This paper focuses on how to best utilize conflict to our advantage. The paper provides some practical and easy to understand steps to increase our chances of benefitting from conflict. This paper will also provide recommendations on how to handle as well as leverage the benefits of conflict using teams.

What is conflict? Conflict originates from the Latin word *conflingere*, which means coming together for a fight or a battle. Coming together is an interesting way to introduce a battle or a fight, in other words, a conflict.

To many, coming together connotes a union that is positive in nature. Coming together, therefore, for a battle or a fight could as equally lead to a positive outcome, enabling supposed adversaries to come closer in order to listen and learn from each other to resolve their dispute and to improve their relationship.

Conflict can be internal or external. Internal conflict can lead to cognitive dissonance when one’s actions do not align with one’s values and beliefs. For example, a person who supports gun control laws can find herself working for a company that manufactures parts employed in the production of guns. *Why am I helping make guns when I strongly support gun control?* Despite her deeply held personal beliefs, she could try to justify her work because she needs the money; it’s the only job available to her in her hometown; or the job is close to her parents’ house allowing for more family visits. But these rationalizations mask the conflict within which will remain with her until she either leaves her job or changes her values and beliefs; the former is more likely to occur.

An external conflict involves more than one individual and usually takes the form of a disagreement. It could be a disagreement over a specific issue, objective, goal, or a plan to best accomplish a task. The individuals may agree on the end result sought, but disagree on the strategy and steps needed to achieve that result. This is often referred to as a substantive conflict.

If a conflict is not substantive (i.e. it does not point to a specific task or goal), it is most likely an emotional one.

An emotional conflict often involves incompatible personalities. We find someone's perfume objectionable, or we do not appreciate someone chewing gum while speaking, or without realizing it, we feel jealous of or intimidated by a colleague.

External conflicts can arise when team members collaborate to complete a project requiring contributions from several individuals. We may not respect comments or ideas presented by one team member. We may not appreciate a team member missing a deadline. We may not appreciate someone coming late to meetings or not coming at all. We may not appreciate someone being distracted by phone calls and emails during a meeting. We may get annoyed by a team member suffering from the shaking leg syndrome (coined by me). Or, we may hold a grudge merely because someone reminds us of a person who hurt us in the past.

The reasons can be as numerous as our imagination.

When we are new to a team, the inclination may be to avoid possible conflict by staying silent hoping that our team members will become more responsible and annoyances will disappear with time. But is that realistic? Will our passivity cause team members to be prompt, meet their commitments, listen to others without interrupting, and devote their undivided attention to the meeting at hand without allowing themselves to be distracted by emails, text messages or phone calls. More likely, those annoyances will not disappear, and our unwillingness to address them head-on only make us more annoyed, even angry escalating the situation to a more serious conflict that could have been avoided with our earlier and diplomatic intervention. No matter the severity of the conflict, it is usually best to address it early.

One way to prepare for conflict within a team is to brainstorm potential situations of conflict and their challenges, even if they never occur. Conducting a brainstorming session to identify possible conflicts is also an excellent way to come together and connect with team members to build trust, increase collaboration and thereby increase the probability of a successful outcome if a real conflict occurs. Brainstorming in this context is effective because it is done without the inevitable interference of emotion and ego which often arise when a real conflict is confronted. This exercise also allows us to incorporate and confront our own past experiences, personal fears or insecurities and past mistakes, things we should never be ashamed of but learn from. For example, a team member may describe how being ignored at a meeting impacted his motivation and self-confidence. Other team members may then become more sensitive to this situation if it arises in the future enabling them to de-escalate potential conflict.

Another example may be a team member's concern over a lack of transparency. Perhaps as a member of a previous team, she was never provided with constructive feedback which would have benefited her. She expresses this concern in a brainstorming session with her current team. Her new team members

now appreciate the importance of constructive feedback when necessary, both of the critical and positive kind. Team members would then better understand how to motivate and work with her more effectively. In my experience, individuals whose constructive feedback we do not appreciate at the time, may indeed be individuals who help us the most. Yes, sometimes, the manner the feedback was presented was not always helpful. It may have been expressed in a destructive and negative way. Yes, if we are able to put aside the delivery method and focus on the message itself, we can benefit.

During this brainstorming exercise, each team member may want to share information on their conflict style. Does it tend to be one that is competitive, collaborative, accommodating or avoiding? If a certain style has affected, in a negative way, our success or ability to achieve our goal effectively, this may be a good time to share with team members our style, especially if we know we want to learn to become less competitive, more collaborative or less accommodating all the time, characteristics that may have affected us negatively in the past. Our past “failures” and weaknesses can be the reason for more future successes starting today.

There are several exercises and role plays we can conduct to practice different conflict styles, depending on the situation.

Other steps can be taken to prepare ourselves to address situations of conflict constructively.

Below are some suggestions for a team exercise:

- Create a project plan with specific tasks and specific deadlines;
- Identify the role each team member will play in accomplishing the goals;
- Identify and agree on the success metrics;
- Identify required support or resources needed to ensure success metrics are met; and
- Agree on how to best handle the potential situations of conflict, even if they never occur, including specific steps to be taken to remedy conflicts should they arise.

Each team member should consider doing the following:

- Articulate the reasons the team project is of interest;
- Identify resources or support needed to accomplish assigned task(s) successfully; and
- List any potential concerns and engage other team members to help mitigate those concerns

Below is a list of best practices to address conflict:

1. Starting the conversation:

- Start the conversation “early.” Learn to recognize and not ignore the early stage of a conflict;
- Meet in person;
- Place your ego aside; focus on what you need to achieve;
- Listen and acknowledge what you hear and allow the other person to express his or her concern - do not interrupt; and

- Explain how the conflict is affecting you and your ability to achieve your goals. Use the word “I” and not “you.”

2. Getting in the right mindset:

- Articulate what you would like to see happen;
- Focus on the relationship and your common goals; and
- Put yourself in the other person’s shoes.

3. Working toward a resolution:

- Make suggestions on ways to work towards a resolution;
- Ask the other party to suggest ways to come to a resolution;
- Focus on how a resolution can benefit both parties;
- Be positive and envision a resolution; and
- Keep an open mind –look at other creative possibilities.

4. Tips to remember

- Beware of assumptions; they may be wrong;
- Be willing to apologize;
- Be willing to forgive;
- Be willing to accept change;
- Be willing to let go;
- Today could be the beginning of what you want to see happen.

Summary: Conflict is not an option. It exists both personally and professionally. When addressed and handled properly in a timely fashion, however, it can have several benefits to individuals, teams and organizations. Some of these benefits include better understanding of one another, mutual respect, better ideas, greater personal satisfaction, greater motivation, greater chance of success, and higher productivity.

In closing, let us reflect on some of our experiences and consider the following two questions:

What is the relationship between an apology and respect?

What is the relationship between risk taking and trust?

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