

Embracing Conflict: It Can Be Healthy

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When we think of conflict, we think of an argument between two people, but conflict is much more than that. Employees are conflicted about policies, team members, clients, and even the medicine they practice. Every day countless conflicts happen in your life.

The Most Important Fact of Any Conversation

No matter how heated the debate or how upset you get in the conversation, the most important thing you must remember is that no one made you have those emotions.

Only you can control your emotions. This is an important fact that all leaders need to communicate to every member of their team. Whenever we are developing a healthy workplace culture, it's important that the individuals working in the team take personal responsibility for their own emotions. Teaching teams that no one made them yell, break something, become depressed, cry or react in any way is important in developing high emotional intelligence (EQ). All individuals need to recognize that how they react and what they feel is solely their own doing.

Emotional intelligence is considered one of the most important traits when it comes to communication. Some studies suggest that 90% of top performers have high emotional intelligence

When people blame others for the cause of their sorrow, frustration, or anger, there can never be any resolution to those feelings. One statement we hear frequently is, "They made me so mad/sad/angry." But, in actuality, that person hasn't made that individual any of those things. A more accurate statement would be, "Their actions of doing XYZ caused me to feel mad/sad/angry."

It is always easier to blame someone else for the cause of why you are feeling the way you are. Most people would rather someone else be the cause of an issue rather than take ownership themselves. I would encourage leaders to educate teams on EQ. You can find literature, seminars, and online videos about how to help develop EQ in individuals. We cannot persuade others, dominate the conversation, or win an argument until we are the Jedi Masters of our own emotions. Therefore, being responsible for what you say and how you react is the most important fact of any conversation.

What Is Your Conflict Style?

Most experts agree that there are five main conflict styles. Each one offers a different approach to how an individual handles conflict. When you have developed an open and trusting relationship with individuals on your team and are faced with a conflict, you can better understand how they respond if you know your own and their conflict style. Each style of conflict puts a value on how the individual views the relationship between themselves and the other person. Does the individual place a high value on their relationship with the other person, or does it not matter as much compared to winning the argument? It also determines how strong that individual desires to win the conflict. Does the person need to win, or is preserving the relationship a higher priority?

Accommodating

This style is the opposite of the competing style. There is an element of self-sacrifice that will satisfy the other person. Most people have been in situations in which they are willing to accommodate another individual. For individuals where this is their main style of managing through conflict, this can cause problems. They often are the only ones accommodating all of the time. They may feel like they have lost or even sabotaged themselves. They sacrifice themselves to maintain harmony in the relationship. The large pro of this type of conflict style is that it often ends the conflict quickly because the individual just gives in, keeping the relationship intact. In some instances, this may be the best type of conflict style to have.

Collaborating

This individual sees a win-win situation. It is a combination of both being assertive and cooperative. Those with a collaborating style attempt to work with others while also pushing their own agenda to find a solution that satisfies everyone, including themselves. The opposite style of this is avoiding.

Negative feelings are typically minimized because both sides get what they want. This tends to foster trust and respect, but the downside to this style is that it can take a long time to find a solution that works for everyone. If the team does not have a great relationship together, then someone may eventually give in to the detriment of their views.

This is a remarkably similar style to compromising. However, compromising is a 50-50 split. In collaborating, it is a win for all involved. No one feels like they have to give anything up. As previously mentioned, this conflict style, while great because it makes everyone feel like they won, can be exceptionally time-consuming. In some situations, it may be impossible to use due to the time factor alone. True collaboration sometimes takes hours, days, or weeks for individuals or teams to develop a true win-win solution that works for all.

Competing

This individual believes their way is the best, and everyone else needs to agree. They are willing to jeopardize the relationship to get what they want. When working in a team, this individual feels that they have the best interests of the team in mind, which is why they fight so fiercely. What they don't realize is that they are destroying the trust within the team because they are competing for the win.

While this seems like a very harsh conflict style, it can be beneficial. Many leaders are often faced with unpopular decisions that must be made. They have the team's best interest even though the team disagrees with them. The organization would be less fruitful if they couldn't implement tough policies. Many leaders need to make decisions that fall solely on them because it's what is best for the hospital.

The disadvantage of this style is that relationships will become broken. No friends will be made using this style of conflict. For individuals in a leadership role, I would recommend not utilizing this conflict resolution style unless absolutely necessary. In the above story, it was necessary to get a handle on the vacation time. Most leaders, at some point, will have to use the competing style of conflict resolution because it is best for the team, but ultimately they will lose trust and even respect of those around them.

If you have a good relationship with your team before you need to make a tough decision you will be able to recover from it, but it will take some time. Do your best to explain the whys to the team and focus on connecting with individuals who struggle with the decision.

Avoiding

This individual simply doesn't want to deal with any conflict. They may not care about the conflict at hand, and they also don't care about the relationship. These individuals are unassertive and uncooperative. They simply withdraw to save themselves from the stress and hassle of dealing with a conflict.

The person withdrawing is hoping that the conflict at hand resolves itself. This can be perceived as obstinance by others. That said, there are times when this is a safer conflict style. I have been known to use this style at times.

Compromising

This style aims to find a mutually acceptable solution that satisfies both parties while maintaining some assertiveness and cooperativeness. This is similar to collaborating. The difference is that each individual involved in the conflict will have to compromise in some way. People will leave feeling like they did not get what they wanted because instead they compromised.

Compromising often occurs faster than collaborating. When things are in a time crunch, this is often how people decide to make decisions. It focuses on saving the relationship by making a decision faster. Each individual involved will be disappointed but happy with the outcome overall. This is the easier way out of many conflicts but leaves each individual slightly dissatisfied.

Learn to Listen

If you want to resolve any conflict, then one of the first things that you need to master is the art of listening. Instead of thinking about how you want to retaliate or what you want to say, just listen.

Stop Trying to Make a Point

I get it. You like to win arguments. So do I, but you will need to stop trying to make your point all the time. The minute you have informed your opponent that they are wrong, you have already lost the battle. Human nature wants to defend or get defensive when someone informs them that they are wrong. It doesn't mean you can't still prove your point, but your approach is important to whether or not you are successful. Too many leaders flat out say, "That's not right," or "You are wrong." Trying to prove a point by being brutally honest instead of using kind communication skills is the fastest way to get the other individual to close their mind to anything you say. The conflict will only get worse.

When dealing with someone confrontational, use questions that will provoke a yes. If they can focus on more yeses, they are less likely to say no.

- Do you want to work in a happy workplace environment? Yes
- Do you want to be less angry at work? Yes
- Do you want to get along better with your team/doctor? Yes
- Do you want to make fewer medical mistakes? Yes

Now we can open the conversation to why their gossiping is inappropriate or why their discriminatory, biased behavior needs to stop. If you go into any conversation with, “I’m going to make this person understand why they are wrong,” you will never win any argument. Instead, you will get them to shut down. Find common ground you know they can agree with and make it your starting point for a productive conversation.

Yelling Over Email? DON’T!

Sometimes there are tough things that you will need to communicate over email. There may be times when someone sends you a crass email and you feel the need to respond. When you send an email that may contain harshness in it, make sure you don’t send it on the day you wrote it. Instead, try to have someone else read it. Utilize the same approach when communicating with someone. Regarding conflicts, it’s always best to wait a day. Have them verbally, not over email. The back and forth over email is surely going to make things worse.

If you must respond to an email centered around a conflicting view, remember to remain professional, polite, kind, and honest. Start with thanking the individual for providing feedback or criticism. It does not matter how out-of-control their email is, assume good intention and don’t reply with yelling in return. While I would love to live in a world where everyone had appropriate email etiquette, unfortunately, that will never be the case. Email has become the device in which people are comfortable venting their frustrations and feelings. They do not think of the receiver when they hit send. I am often shocked by veterinary technicians, veterinarians, client service representatives, and even practice managers that send some pretty offensive emails.

Avoiding Conflict is Just as Important as Avoiding One

Statements to Pick a Fight

- “Don’t take it personally...”
- “Don’t be sad/mad/angry...”
- “No offense but...”
- “Don’t get emotional...”
- “Always or Never (You always/never) ...”
- “That’s Stupid/Ridiculous...”
- “Everyone thinks...”
- “I (You) don’t care...”
- “Last week/month/year you said or did...”
- Most statements with the word YOU in it:
 - “You are a...”
 - “You are making this...”
 - “Here you go again...”
 - “You need to calm down...”
 - “You are exaggerating...”

Constructive vs. Destructive Criticism

There are two types of criticism. Constructive and destructive. Constructive criticism is the beneficial type of criticism. It comes from a place of kindness though the receiver of the constructive criticism may not feel that way. Constructive criticism does not insult you personally but seeks to help, guide, or improve a situation. It is considered helpful.

Destructive criticism is malicious. The person making the criticism does not offer any type of solution and is instead assaulting you as a person. They are seeking to insult your self-esteem, the job you did, or the values you hold. It's angry, resentful, and hateful.

In a workplace environment, most criticism is meant to be constructive but often is mishandled and becomes destructive. An individual might not go about it in the best way despite their intention of trying to be kind. It's important that we have a bigger conversation with our teams about how constructive criticism is only well-received if the receiver receives it as such. Likewise, we need to have conversations with our teams about not assuming mal intent of the person delivering the criticism.

Before you or any member of your team decides to offer feedback or constructive criticism, ask yourself, "How would I feel if someone provided me this same feedback or criticism?" Running the criticism by someone else before delivering it may help provide insight as to whether it will land well or not.

Because most people believe conflict is bad, they tend to avoid any criticism. Author Patrick Lencioni wrote about conflict in his best-seller *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (2002). The fear of conflict is listed as a team's second dysfunction out of the five. Teams that lack trust between members and the ability to engage in healthy conflict, do not openly air their concerns. They end up sharing criticism privately to others in the form of gossip. Healthy conflict is necessary for the team's overall health. Without it, they end up dysfunctional.

Promoting Productive Conflict

- 1) Have a conversation with your team about productive conflict. They should embrace having opposing viewpoints and opinions and understand it makes for a more creative and cohesive team. We certainly don't want everyone on the team to think the same thing all the time. Be sure to introduce healthy communication skills before introducing productive conflict conversations.
- 2) Create a set of clubhouse rules that all team members agree to. Working on this together as a team is pretty powerful because of the commitment of wanting to maintain a polite and respectful relationship with each other even when disagreements arise.
- 3) During meetings, look for conflicts. Be sure to look for the eye rolls, the snarky facial expressions, or the whispering between team members. If you see something, say something! Don't call out the snarky face or eye roll. Instead, try saying, "You seem like you're not completely on board with this new policy," or, "I get a sense that you're feeling uneasy or unhappy about something." Follow up with, "I know it's hard, but I would love to hear your thoughts because this is a safe space to communicate how you feel." If you are lucky enough to have an individual communicate what they think and feel, thank them immediately! This shows the rest of the group

that you appreciate and value honesty. If you criticize or become defensive, you will shut the door to any future conversations.

4) When you see two individuals expressing differing opinions, praise them at an appropriate time. It decreases their guilt about having the conflict and increases their ability to have a healthy conflict because they were permitted to do so. So long as they are following the clubhouse rules of engagement, praise them for their professionalism and honesty.

5) Never pick sides! If two individuals or departments disagree, you should act as a mediator. The minute a leader picks a side is the minute when you influence the rest of the team's decision. Allow them to work through it together without your influence. Even if you think there's no way that you could influence a decision, you will. It is because you are in a leadership role. Act only as the mediator to help facilitate the discussion. Mediate that it's okay to disagree, but in the end, everyone needs to commit to the decision.

6) Talk to the team or individual about how they are feeling. It's uncomfortable to do so, but they will understand that you have their best interest in mind so long as you utilize a kind approach. You want to make sure their voices are heard so validate their emotions. "You are a valued member of the team, but you haven't spoken up during this conversation. I want to make sure that we hear from you. How do you feel about this?"

Conclusion

It's impossible that everyone will get along all of the time. Learning skills for how to handle conflict is important so you can maintain relationships and learn how to move past disagreements.