

**CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?
RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT IN THE
WORKPLACE**

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Over the years I've worked with a wide variety of teams, from executive boards to helpdesk personnel. For many of them, the very idea of 'conflict' is uncomfortable. But conflict is a fact of life. We're all human, and I can guarantee everyone reading this article has been in that awkward situation where they just can't get along with a teammate. Whether you work shoulder to shoulder with your colleagues, or you are part of a virtual team that has never met in person, from time to time there is likely to be a personality clash.

Is conflict healthy?

Do you instinctively think of conflict as a negative experience? If the answer is yes, you're definitely not alone. But does that situation always have to be difficult? Can conflict be a positive process, the accumulation of passionate differences in opinion or even just an authentic dialogue? I would argue, yes – conflict can actually be beneficial to you, your team and your organization. I would even go so far as to say it can be a sign of a healthy team and a healthy workplace!

Understanding the differences

So why can't we all just get along? Understanding each others' differences is one thing, but it's often a stretch for us to truly value and adapt to another person's individuality. While you may be a cautious planner, someone who gets the job done by being prepared, your colleague might be an impulsive decision maker, someone who achieves quick results but doesn't always prepare for all eventualities. Can two such extremely opposing personalities work alongside each other without clashing? Obviously if clashes go beyond the point of constructive disagreements, then the impact is negative. However, in most cases, these interactions can be of benefit to the individual, team and the greater organization. In his book [Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#), Patrick Lencioni says of constructive clashes that the ideal point for conflict is prior to the stage when a constructive dispute becomes destructive.

Facing up to conflict

I've spoken with people who complain that they seem to be in constant battle with their peers. Upon scratching the surface, however, what may be perceived to be difficult discussions are in fact productive, passionate and unfiltered debates. The problem is that when we fear or avoid conflict, we step back from situations where questions may be asked, where voices may be raised, and problems may be resolved. Lencioni argues that artificial harmony, although superficially the ideal scenario in the workplace, can be extremely damaging. If your workplace

is totally devoid of conflict, can you honestly say the team is as effective as it could be? Challenging our colleagues is, to a certain point, healthy. If team members aren't questioning each other, if they're not occasionally making one another uncomfortable during discussions, then the likelihood is they're not making the best decisions for the organization.

What's not being said?

I'm not suggesting you actively seek out conflict. But I do believe that we should be paying attention to the conversations we're not having because we're deliberately trying to be nice to one another. It's how you deal with these difficult conversations when they arise that will impact the effectiveness of your team. In my opinion, there are three key steps to successfully addressing conflict:

- Understand the Differences - have an authentic dialogue about the different perspectives
- Decide on a mutually acceptable resolution to the issue
- Implement strategies to minimize conflict/disruption in the future

The Insights approach to Team Effectiveness recognizes conflict as a Defining Moment in the life of a team that, if left unchecked, often results in a decline in effectiveness. For any team to reach its full potential, it must prepare for and respond to these Defining Moments. When it comes to understanding the dramatic impact constructive conflict can have on a team, frameworks such as the Insights Team Effectiveness model can help. The model identifies the areas in which a team must excel in order to be fully effective. Using this approach we can examine the way conflict impacts each area and develop strategies to achieve more positive, constructive outcomes. The Insights Team Effectiveness model identifies four pillars of team effectiveness (shown in the centre of the wheel), eight elements (on the outer rim of the wheel) and 32 issues (within the wheel). Constructive Conflict can be found within the element of Cohesion, but will have a positive impact on each of the pillars by influencing the underlying issues:

Climate

We've all experienced a personality clash or an intense disagreement that is unmanaged and left to fester within a team. Team members align themselves to one side or the other, creating a rift and drawing in others. Soon everyone is experiencing a drop in motivation and trust. In contrast, if conflict is constructive, it can help surface underlying tensions, making sure contradictory points of view are heard. How do you ensure a team has the necessary levels of openness and respect, so that individuals can make their opinions known without fear of reprisal?

Focus

A team with a strong focus works together towards a common vision, mission and goals. Unmanaged conflict often means that individuals work on their own agendas, with collective targets becoming secondary to personal ones. Ironically, it is engaging in constructive conflict that produces the best vision and mission statements. It is only when all team members contribute in an unbridled way, bringing their passion and beliefs, that they feel they have a full stake in the goals created. What are the tell-tale signs of unhealthy competition within a team? What actions are needed to ensure that the team truly has a shared purpose?

Flow

A team in flow works together to generate ideas and solutions. If this flow is disrupted by conflict, the team becomes 'stuck' and cannot overcome obstacles or adjust their course if they are on the wrong track. In the most extreme cases, the team becomes paralyzed and synergy breaks down. Conversely, engaging in constructive conflict results in dialogue that encourages learning and innovation. Having the difficult conversations, especially when an idea isn't working, will enable a team to 'fail forwards' and move on. How can a team ensure differences of opinion add rather than detract from the process of innovation? How does a team ensure that minority opinions are acknowledged?

Process

The negative effects of conflict on Process can be less obvious than in the other pillars, but they are equally destructive. Entrenched opinions on 'the way we do things around here' can leave the team stuck in a dysfunctional rut. Team members begin to ignore processes altogether or rigidly stick to procedures in a passive aggressive way. This inevitably leads to a breakdown of the interdependencies within the team. In contrast, more constructive conflict can help a team find more efficient ways of working. This in turn leads to greater clarity of roles and responsibilities. How does a team encourage challenges to the established process and promote continuous improvement?

Harnessing conflict

Perhaps the biggest advantage of using frameworks such as the Insights Team Effectiveness model is that they help to bring to life the idea that conflict is not restricted to the individuals involved, but its effects can be felt in all aspects of team working. If there's a personality clash, not only will the atmosphere change but also processes will be affected. If there's a professional conflict, not only will focus of the team be affected, but so too will the team's ability to innovate. Turning to its positive applications, constructive conflict can propel your team to greater success. Rather than something to be avoided at all costs, if managed correctly it can bring unexpected benefits. It can challenge team members to push themselves, and the team, outside of their

comfort zone. The next time you want everyone to just get along, ask yourself, what's not being said? What's not being understood? It could be your team's Defining Moment.