

Conflict Management as a Core Competency for HR Professionals

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Human history is rife with conflict. From the biblical story of Cain and Abel to the Hundred Years' War to the front pages of today's newspaper, divergent opinions, cultures, ideas and interests collide on scales both grand and mundane. The fallout from these clashes can be tragic, as when nations fight for resources or societal inequities explode into violence on city streets.

Conflict can be devastating in business as well. It can destroy morale, polarize co-workers and divert precious energy from meeting business goals. A University of North Carolina survey of 1,400 workers found that more than half had lost time at work due to conflicts with colleagues. More than a third said that their commitment to their employer had decreased due to these conflicts. And 22 percent said conflict had reduced their productivity (Takeuchi Cullen, 2008).

Managers suffer equally from the stress of workplace conflict, according to the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program of the University of Colorado, which reported that, "It has been estimated that managers spend at least 25 percent of their time resolving workplace conflicts—causing lowered office performance" (University of Colorado at Boulder, 2008).

As the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close, conflict is more pervasive than ever. However, defusing it has never been more difficult. Much of this is attributable to the speed-and-stealth model that modern organizations must follow to compete in a lightning-fast, global business environment.

Cross-functional teams, composed of members from across the organization, with a diversity of knowledge and skill sets, are a vital part of the new model. Members of these teams often feel that their first allegiance is to the manager of their function, not to the leader of the team on which they serve part time. Team leaders end up having no direct control, only influence, leaving them impotent to enforce deadlines or correct unproductive behavior.

Teams working in shifts, asynchronously, are also fertile ground for conflict. Workers may never see the person who is demanding results from them. It is easy to understand how workers can feel estranged from colleagues who are punching in just as they are going to sleep.

The lack of connectedness is even greater on global teams, where colleagues are divided by continents. Differences in time, language, culture, systems and policies become potential sources of conflict. The more differences that exist among team members, the more likely there will be misunderstandings, failures to communicate and interpersonal conflicts. Global product launches, where timing is everything, ratchet up the pressure on team members who may never even have met one another face to face.

The Two Faces of Conflict

The biggest misconception that people hold about conflict is that it is intrinsically bad. However conflict in and of itself is an inevitable social and organizational reality. It is rooted in the human condition and is not necessarily an indicator of dysfunction. **It just is.**

While conflict can cause great harm, it has another side—one that is often overlooked. The dynamic tension that results when executives go head-to-head can be a source of great creativity, excitement and even strength. It can help an organization develop the muscle it needs to vanquish less well-endowed competitors.

Takeo Fujisawa, co-founder of the Honda Motor Company, understood the positive role conflict can play in keeping an organization vital:

I like Bartok and Stravinsky. It's a discordant sound—and there are discordant sounds inside a company. As president, you must orchestrate the discordant sounds into a kind of harmony. But you never want too much harmony. One must cultivate a taste for finding harmony within discord, or you will drift away from the forces that keep a company alive. (Tanner, 1990, p. 256)

Fujisawa believed strongly that examining and accepting differences is healthy, beneficial and necessary. Probing management disagreements can spur effective problem solving and be a boon to creative strategic and operational decision making. Sharing competing viewpoints shapes and sharpens action as it opens up thinking to new possibilities.

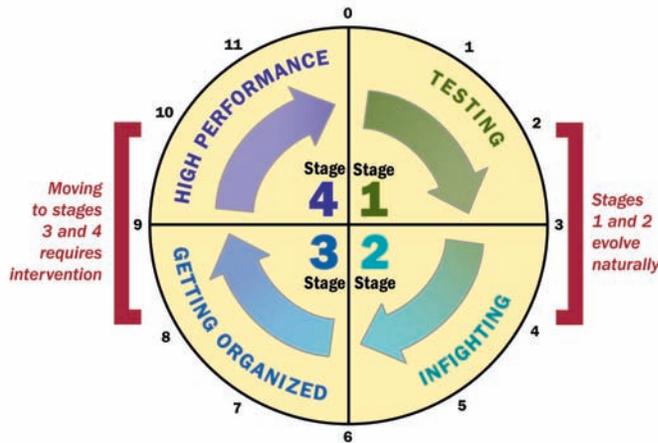
Managing Team Conflict

Volumes have been written on the subject of human conflict, and our intention in these pages is not to delve into its social and psychological causes and effects. Our observations relate to one type of conflict only: conflict in the workplace. And the solution we offer is intended to help businesses turn dysfunctional conflict into healthy confrontation and business results.

In two recent books (*Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader*, Jossey-Bass, 2007 and *Building Conflict Competent Teams*, Jossey-Bass, 2008) Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan of the Center for Creative Leadership explore the roots of conflict, its dual nature and its inevitability. And they conclude that, "Your workplace may be a Fortune 500 company or a family-owned small business. It may be government offices, schools or non-profit agencies. It really doesn't matter because conflict occurs in all workplaces." (Runde and Flanagan, 2007, p. 1)

Whether workplace conflict works for or against an organization, shores it up or undermines its foundation, depends on **how that conflict is managed**. While conflict within organizations is becoming increasingly prevalent and more and more of a disadvantage, some organizations and their teams have learned to effectively manage conflict. The transfer of conflict management skills is one step in the process, but changing the way

EXHIBIT 1: TEAM DEVELOPMENT WHEEL



ATTRIBUTES OF EACH STAGE			
HIGH PERFORMANCE 4 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clear team goals. 2. Right "players" in place 3. Clear roles/responsibilities 4. Commitment to "winning" for the business team over self-interest. 5. Agreed-upon decision-making/ leadership mechanism. 6. Sense of ownership/accountability for business results. 7. Comfort dealing with conflict. 8. Periodic self-assessment. 	TESTING 1 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Air is "thick". 2. Team members maintain a façade. 3. Fear of confronting issues/individuals. 4. Denial of conflict. 5. Team members wary of one another. 		
GETTING ORGANIZED 3 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarifying roles/goals 2. Developing skills. 3. Establishing procedures. 4. Giving feedback. 5. Confronting issues, not people. 	INFIGHTING 2 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personalization of issues. 2. Members feel attacked, frustrated. 3. Finger-pointing. 4. Tension. 5. Control issues. 		



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conflict is viewed and resolved organization-wide requires a more robust, multi-prong initiative. It requires that all teams, on every level of the organization, be Stage-4, high-performance teams.

In working with hundreds of teams, at every level and in organizations of all types, we have found that teams can be located within one of four stages of development. The work of Susan A. Wheelan (Wheelan, 2005) offers a similar conclusion. However, our experience has led to the description of these four stages that is represented in Exhibit 1.

Stage-1 teams are underperformers, as team members remain wary of one another; conflict is buried underground; and issues are not deal with openly. At the other extreme of the Team Development Wheel, Stage-4, high-performance teams have clear goals and

accountabilities; have protocols in place for dealing with conflict; and have built relationships based on transparency and candor. It's important to note that such teams are not conflict free. They may have as much, or more, conflict than Stage-1 teams. What is the difference? **Stage-4 teams have learned how to turn conflict into healthy confrontation—and into business results.**

As indicated on the Team Development Wheel, Stages 1 and 2 evolve naturally. A newly formed team may remain in Stage 1 for a while; then, as the members become more familiar with one another, the group may move into Stage 2. There, members drop the façade and play more authentically. As a result, conflict is no longer hidden. It is likely to increase. Teams may remain stuck in Stage 1 or 2—or vacillate between the two stages—for years, until someone intervenes.

Managing Conflict: Five Actions for HR

It is common for teams to naturally move between Stages 1 and 2. However, our many years of observation have convinced us of this: **It's a rare team that can accelerate to Stage 3 without outside intervention.** The attributes that players require in these stages don't come naturally. The personal transformations that leaders and players must go through are difficult and uncomfortable. These changes require commitment, courage and a disciplined process.

While moving a team out of Stages 1 and 2 is best done by an outside consultant, the organization's own human resources department can be an internal source of support for the effort.

Gerard Kells, vice president, HR, Operations and Technology, for Johnson & Johnson, was part of a senior team that we took through conflict-management training. Armed with the skills he learned during those sessions, he began to spot red flags on other teams. In one instance, members of a cross-functional team continually sought him out for advice. They were unclear about their individual and collective responsibilities and decision-making authority. As a result of the team's concerns, Kells went to the team leader and recommended training to correct the situation.

Kells recognized the telltale signs of unresolved conflict within a team and held up a mirror to the leader by providing feedback from the team on his failure to set clear responsibilities. The "reflected self" was an eye-opener, and the leader readily bought in to Kells' recommendation to convene the team for a quick review session. Kells led the session, in which the group agreed on the decision-making and approval processes it would be using going forward. This eliminated a good deal of the discomfort the team members had been feeling.

But Kells realized that there was a larger problem that still needed to be solved: The leader and the team members had never discussed the way they dealt with conflict. They had never set guidelines for the resolution of contentious situations. He recommended that the team go through an alignment, and that the alignment be led by an outside consultant who would be viewed as totally objective by both the leader and the team.

Once senior management commits to the need to raise the level of play, HR profession-

als can continue to fill an important role in helping to move teams from Stage 1 to Stage 4. In the process, they can contribute significantly to the health and effectiveness of their organizations and raise the stature of the HR function to that of strategic contributor.

As an internal keeper of the high-performance team-development process, and in partnership with an outside consultant, there are five actions that HR professionals can and should take to help teams manage conflict and achieve higher levels of performance.

1. Be a custodian of team alignment.

The goal, or “should be,” for every team is to acquire the eight attributes of a Stage-4 team that are listed below the Team Development Wheel. If a team is not yet there, even if it is committed to changing fundamentally its level of play, there is only one way to accelerate its progress around the Team Development Wheel: The team must become aligned. That is, all its members must be in agreement in the five key areas depicted in Exhibit 2.

On an aligned team, all members are clear on business strategy and the operational goals that flow from that strategy. Accountabilities are clearly defined. Members operate with agreed-upon protocols and intra-team relationships are based on transparency. Most importantly, dysfunctional conflict is reduced and redirected into a productive force for producing results.

The consultant helps the team assess how tightly it is aligned—the “as is”—by holding a mirror to a team’s collective face, and by asking the following questions:

- How would you rate the clarity of your organization’s business strategy?
- How clear are your team’s goals? Your individual goals as a team member?
- How clear are you about your role/accountability on the team? What about other people’s roles/accountabilities?
- Do you have agreed-upon rules in place for which decisions are made by whom, and how (unilaterally, consultatively or by consensus)?

- Do you have rules in place for the way conflict is handled? (e.g., no accusing in absentia; resolve it in 24 hours or let it go; no “hands from the grave” or second-guessing once the team has made a decision; no “triangulation” or going to a third-party rescuer)
- From “independently” to “interdependently,” how do you think team members currently work together?
- From “there is no tolerance for confrontation; conflicts are suppressed” to “tensions are surfaced, confronted and resolved within the team,” how do you think conflict is handled by the group?

After the consultant and the team go through the initial alignment session, and on an ongoing basis, HR’s radar needs to be finely tuned to each of the key alignment factors to make sure the team continues to be in sync. To do so effectively, the team’s HR professional must constantly be taking a step back and viewing the team’s dialogue and interaction as though he or she were the director behind the camera—not an actor involved in the passion and emotion of the scene. Many teams request that the HR professional sit in on their meetings and, at the end, conduct a quick and informal reality check by asking questions:

- “How do you think you are doing as a team?”
- Do you have any questions about what you are expected to accomplish?
- Are you clear about next steps?
- Are the ground rules you’ve established holding up?
- Does anyone have a problem with anyone else?
- Are there any issues that you don’t feel comfortable raising?”

Then, from HR, “Here’s what I saw: John cut Sally off in the middle of a sentence. Alex seemed very annoyed when Eleanor asked him for this week’s sales figures. Sam and Katherine both seem to think that they are responsible for hiring the new head of engineering. You never agreed on the date when the due diligence on the acquisition has to be completed. You spent 45 minutes rehashing a decision that was made by the sub-team you assigned to it last month.”

And, finally, “What are you going to do about each of these areas of misalignment? You

EXHIBIT 2: KEY ALIGNMENT FACTORS



need to take action to get back on track right away.”

HR professionals must develop superb assessment, coaching and consulting skills in order to become custodians after the initial team alignment. The internal HR consultant must locate the hot spots, calibrate the pressure and look for ways to relieve it.

2. Drive/monitor accountability.

A unique characteristic of a high-performance team involves a mindset change that is difficult to bring about. It centers on one word: accountability. When it comes to holding others accountable, we are programmed to think vertically, not horizontally, and downward rather than upward. Members of great business teams have broken free of these constraints. They think of themselves as operating on a horizontal playing field, where they become accountable not only for their own performance, but for that of their colleagues—even those who do not report to them.

In this new high-performance, horizontal model, the head of IT feels perfectly comfortable and, in fact, is obligated to question actions by the head of marketing that may be putting a new product launch at risk. The controller has no qualms about asking the director of HR to explain the ROI of a new training program.

Members of Stage-4 teams have climbed to the highest rung of the Accountability Ladder.

As the ladder illustrates below, on a high-performance team, no one’s—not even the leader’s—performance is exempt from scrutiny and feedback.

Team members can use a boost as they attempt to move up each rung of the ladder, but nowhere more than when they attempt to reach the point where they hold the leader accountable. As a member of the team and as

its internal consultant, HR can offer that boost, as the following example illustrates.

The top divisional team of a major consumer goods company met to discuss a new product concept being advanced by the vice presidents of R&D and marketing. The new concept was supported by the majority of senior executives on the team, but the president simply didn’t think it would add “oomph” to the current product portfolio. After a quick discussion, he attempted to dodge the issue by moving to shelve further debate.

Into the breach stepped the vice president of HR. Rather than let the team shut down in the face of the president’s cavalier dismissal, he politely but forcefully confronted his leader. “We have a stalemate, Bob,” he addressed the president. “You’re not ready for a full discussion of the issue, yet it’s apparent that the team is not willing to let go of the idea. What do we see as the next steps to get closure?”

As a result of this HR executive’s demand for accountability, the president and his team decided to reconvene a smaller sub-team, which would include the president and be facilitated by the vice president of human resources. Shortly afterward, the issue was brought to closure by the sub-team, presented to the full team, and the company moved forcefully ahead.

3. Help assess the team’s conflict-management behavior.

a. How does the team, as a whole, deal with conflict?

There are essentially four ways in which the players in a conflict-laden situation can deal with the conflict:

1. **Play the victim:** Say nothing, act powerless and complain.
2. **Leave:** Physically remove oneself from involvement.

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3. **Change oneself:** Move off one’s position; shift one’s view of the other party; “let it go.”

4. **Confront:** Address the issue openly, candidly and objectively; communicate with the other party.

Playing the victim generally exacerbates a situation by sweeping conflict under the carpet. It causes hard feelings and delays the inevitable. The second option is often unavailable. Besides, conflict is a given. You better learn to deal with it here and now. Changing yourself is fine, but don’t count on being able to do it. The question is: What price are you willing to pay?

This leaves confronting as the most effective way to resolve issues without igniting thermonuclear war.

We have already spoken about the value HR can add by continuing to hold up a mirror so the team can see the areas in which it is slipping back into misalignment. After the initial alignment, the same technique—asking the team members to self-assess, and then reflecting their responses back to the entire group—can be used by the internal HR consultant to help the team assess how well it has succeeded in changing the way it deals with conflict. Ask each team member the following questions, then share results with the full group:

EXHIBIT 3: THE ACCOUNTABILITY LADDER

5th Individuals accountable for the success of the organization

4th Individuals accountable for their leader’s success

3rd Individuals accountable for peers (HPT kicks in)

2nd Individuals accountable for direct reports

1st Individuals accountable for their own performance

- Is your business strategy fuzzy or unclear? Does the senior team frequently debate its meaning?
- Do meetings multiply because closure is never reached? Do they frequently devolve into free-for-alls?
- Are the atmospherics “thick” when a certain executive enters the room or a particular issue is raised? Can you feel the tension?
- Are post-mortems, especially following decision-making sessions, de rigueur?
- Are priorities constantly changing? Are people unclear about who owns issues? About what they are authorized to do?
- Do to-do lists never get done?
- Is decision “hang time”—the time span from making to implementing decisions—increasing? Are decisions made by a select few? Or, at the other extreme, does every Executive Committee decision require consensus?
- Do disagreements between executives require a referee or a third-party Solomon to be resolved?
- Are discussion and debate discouraged? Is silent agreement the norm?

The more questions to which the team answers “yes,” the greater its need to reexamine its behavior and take corrective actions.

b. How do individual players deal with conflict?

Helping the team as a whole examine its ongoing behavior is just the first step. Just as a team tends to favor one option for dealing with conflict, individual team members tend to adopt one behavioral style when dealing with one another. Here, too, HR can help players identify persistent gaps between the “as is” and the “should be” of their interpersonal behavior.

While human behavior doesn’t lend itself to neat typologies, we have found it helpful to think about the method we use to communicate in terms of a continuum, which we call The Behavioral Continuum:

Just as a team generally favors one method of dealing with conflict, in the workplace individuals tend to operate within the same area of the continuum:

- **Nonassertive** individuals allow others’ points of view and decisions to take precedence, even when they disagree. They

EXHIBIT 4: THE BEHAVIORAL CONTINUUM



EXHIBIT 5: A DISCONNECT ON THE BEHAVIORAL CONTINUUM



“pretend” that others’ viewpoints or behaviors are OK, but inside they are resentful. Nonassertive individuals are often treated in ways they dislike because they do not set boundaries. This is lose-win thinking.

- **Aggressive** individuals play out “my way or the highway.” They use their power to send a negative message: “My needs are more important than yours.” While aggressive people may initially get their way more often, a win-lose mentality will ultimately damage relationships with others and their **own credibility**.
- **Assertive** individuals stand up for their needs and, at the same time, are respectful of the needs of others. They listen to and consider others’ points of view. On high-performing teams, individuals take an assertive stance with each other. This is the most effective style for creating a “win-win” environment, for successfully influencing others and for resolving conflict.

One of the toughest tasks is accurately identifying one’s personal style, and it may be necessary to spend a significant part of the alignment session on this activity. Afterward, the internal HR consultant can once again add value.

An exercise that the outside consultant performs with a team—and that the internal HR

consultant can repeat periodically—involves asking the team members, one by one, to pinpoint where on the continuum from non-assertive to assertive to aggressive they believe their behavior generally falls. Then, the consultant can ask each of the other team members to comment on the person’s self-assessment. Often, the results are revealing.

On one high-level cross-functional team, a manager named Dan rated himself highly assertive, as represented by the “x” on the Behavioral Continuum shown in Exhibit 5.

As the rest of the team discussed Dan’s self-assessment, it quickly became apparent that there was a fairly large disconnect between his image of himself and theirs. The majority of the group said that they considered Dan to be very aggressive. They pointed to his intensity and the fact that he was “wound tight.” They said that when he presented his viewpoint he was not open to discussion or critique. One or two of his colleagues confessed that they felt very intimidated by Dan. The group’s average assessment of Dan is represented by the “y” at the far right of the continuum.

Dan was surprised by the disconnect between his own assessment of himself and that of the group, and this gave him new insight into the way he was communicating with others.



Cultural Differences

The way we communicate—or fail to communicate—with others often varies with our cultural heritage. Different cultures have very different levels of comfort with self-assertion. It's well known that in the Far East people tend to be much less forthcoming during business meetings, especially with outside associates or higher-level executives in their own organization. And behavior that many Americans view as hospitality and friendliness can come across as too pushy or overly familiar to people who are used to building relationships over a long period of time.

Philosophical or religious differences also affect the way people prefer to deal with conflict. On one senior team I worked with recently, a fairly heated discussion arose during the alignment. I noticed that two of the players remained stone silent. When the argument subsided, I asked them if they had anything to add. One of them demurred, saying he was new to the team and didn't feel qualified to offer an opinion. The other, a native of China, simply said, "No, I don't." When I asked if he ever became angry or frustrated, he replied, "Angry, of course not.

A unique characteristic of a high-performance team involves a mindset change that is difficult to bring about. It centers on one word: accountability.

"Anger is not Buddhist; it is not Taoist." He did admit to sometimes being frustrated when conversations went on and on without resolution. How did he handle those emotions? "I feel them inside and keep them to myself," he confessed.

I pointed out that expressing frustration wasn't necessarily anti-Buddhist or anti-Taoist. In fact, he could add considerable value by letting the group know he was frustrated with endless discussion and suggesting the team move on

either to making a decision or planning next steps for future resolution. I also suggested that he might help others who felt the same but didn't have the courage to interject by prefacing his remarks with the question, "Is anyone besides me feeling frustrated by this discussion?"

It isn't always easy to see ourselves as others see us. However, until we do our perceptions will remain limited—and limiting.

4. Ensure the right capability set on teams.

Helping teams and players assess their current stage of performance enables them to identify gaps and make plans for the corrective actions that can get them moving from Stages 1 and 2 into Stage 3, and eventually, into Stage 4 of the Team Development Wheel. But they will never be able to execute those plans without certain skills. "Regardless of how smart you are intellectually," says Manuel Jessup, chief human resources officer at Chico's, "if you don't have the 'soft' skills of influencing, active listening and assertion, it won't work. People who want to have a conversation, but don't possess these skills, can't do it."

A major role for HR is ensuring that, after the "should-be-as is" analysis, teams receive the skills needed to fill the gaps. The internal HR consultant can supply skills in any number of

ways: formal workshops, informal on-job feedback sessions, full-team coaching and individual coaching sessions with players who are having difficulty meeting the requirements of the new, high-performance environment.

Every member of a high-performance team needs the "soft" skills Jessup enumerates:

1. Influencing Skills—the ability to get needs met with and through others, especially when

you have no direct authority over them.

2. Active Listening Skills—the ability to clarify, understand and acknowledge another's point of view.

3. Assertion Skills—being able to balance courage and consideration. In other words, be assertive, rather than nonassertive or aggressive.

5. Work to make sure that teams are high performers.

As the Team Development Wheel depicts, every high-performance team possesses eight key attributes:

1. The mission, goals and business priorities of the team are clear to all team members.
2. The team is comprised of the right players. This implies that they are technically/functionally competent, with the ability and willingness to influence across functional lines.
3. The roles/points of intersection/turf of every player on the team are clear to all team members.
4. Team members are committed to the team winning (achieving the business goal) over their own parochial/functional self-interest.
5. The decision-making/leadership mechanism that the team employs is understood and accepted by all team members.
6. Every team member feels a sense of ownership/accountability for the business results that the team creates. As a result, all team members feel that they have license to speak on any matter concerning how the group functions. They operate like a managing board of directors.
7. All team members are comfortable dealing with conflict. They are willing to be candid, are able to depersonalize, and can attempt to reach resolution on outstanding issues.
8. The team is willing to periodically self-assess its progress, focusing on how well it functions as a total group. This includes assessing the business deliverables, individual commitments, and relevant protocols.

After the alignment, getting teams to continue striving for these eight attributes requires HR to dig deeply into its reservoir of capabilities. It requires the internal HR consultant to wear many hats: consultant, coach, facilitator, trainer and, perhaps most important, role model.

Moving a Team Forward

In the spirit that one example is worth a thousand generalities, let's look at how Paul Parker partnered with a business' general manager to move a dysfunctional, misaligned team to a whole new level.

While Parker was vice president of HR responsible for Colgate-Palmolive's Africa-Middle East Division, the company had some problems with its South African subsidiary, which was considered by New York headquarters to be a team of mavericks. South Africa was an independent business unit—a \$150-million business run by functional vice presidents who were very successful at delivering results. But team leaders shouldn't let their members grow up to be cowboys: In Colgate-Palmolive's case, some members of the top team rode roughshod over one another and others in the organization, especially those in manufacturing. Although frequently called on the carpet by headquarters, the team's deaf ear led it to continue to engage in behaviors that violated global company policy.

Fortunately, the general manager realized that what was good for South Africa wasn't necessarily good for the rest of the organization. He knew that unless the subsidiary cleaned up its act, it was never going to be viewed as world class and a source of global talent. With team survival hanging in the balance, Parker and the general manager of the subsidiary decided it was time for action.

As Parker describes it, "We met with the whole team, and the general manager led the initial discussion. He made a persuasive business case for change. The South African market could only grow so fast, he explained. The real way to achieve growth was to become a global supplier for C-P, and the only way to do this was to be viewed within the company as reliable global citizens. South Africa could no longer be the wild, wild West."

The group went through a "should be/as is" exercise, in which corporate values and expectations were placed alongside the team's actual values and behaviors. When the team members got a glimpse of themselves as they appeared to others, they realized that delivering bottom-line results was important, but so was the way they went about achieving them.

Following this exercise and alignment sessions, the team made the necessary behavioral changes. Before long, South Africa went from being a top-20 subsidiary to a top-5 subsidiary—one of the fastest growing in the corporation. The parent company made major investments in it, enabling it to become a global supplier of dental cream and a test bed for new-product toothpaste trials. And, once considered mavericks who couldn't be trusted, many of the team members were promoted to major positions in the global company: The general manager became CFO of North America, the company's biggest division; the controller went to Canada, a top-5 subsidiary, to become its financial controller; the HR person became head of HR for the United Kingdom.

As Parker sums it up, "They became a source of power because of their willingness to listen to feedback and act on it."

End Thought

For HR to make a real contribution to team success, HR professionals need to possess the skills needed in a high-performance environment. Apart from transferring conflict management skills—influencing, active listening, assertion and depersonalizing issues—they need to role-model them in their own interactions throughout the organization.

HR must also be willing to step up and play at a much higher level, especially when dealing with senior executive teams. By assuming a key role in helping teams learn to manage conflict, HR can receive greater exposure, make a more substantial impact and contribute to business results. Playing at this new level means taking greater risks, but it also brings greater rewards than sitting on the sidelines, uninvolved.

The skills, organizational position and experience of HR professionals make them uniquely qualified to deliver a higher level of contribution to team performance. Now is the time for HR to take the initiative and apply those skills to teams at every level, beginning with the senior executive team, ensuring that these leaders are pro-

ficient at achieving results, navigating conflict and moving to a significantly higher level of play. **P&S**

Howard M. Guttman is principal of Mt. Arlington, NJ-based Guttman Development Strategies, Inc. His book, *Great Business Teams: Cracking the Code for Standout Performance* (www.greatbusinessteams.com), was recently released by John Wiley. His previous book, *When Goliaths Clash: Managing Executive Conflict to Build a More Dynamic Organization*, is now available in paperback.

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