

The Art of Managing Conflict

BY HOWARD M. GUTTMAN

It does no good to run away from disagreement and discord. Confronting conflict head-on will make any organization run smoother.

WE ARE NOT comfortable, and, in fact, even fear dealing straight up with conflict. We are taught to run away from it, “turn the other cheek,” “let sleeping dogs lie,” and that “if you do not have something nice to say, do not say anything at all.” So we retreat to the least-trying option: looking to third parties for temporary relief.

Fear is a killer of effective conflict management. At home, dysfunctional families sweep internecine disputes under the rug. Friends often let relationships fall by the wayside rather than air their differences.

In business, ineffective managers are afraid of the consequences of bringing highly charged issues out into the open. They fail to encourage people to speak up, share their opinions, tell it—and to be told—like it is. By their refusal to discuss certain issues, they create an implicit environment that devalues authentic

discussion and promotes subterfuge and double-dealing.

When you stop to think about it, there essentially are four ways in which the players in a conflict-laden situation can deal with it:

- **Playing the victim:** saying nothing, acting powerless, and complaining. Such behavior clearly is corrosive and often subversive. It leads to griping and sniping and tends to drive discord underground. Injured parties can sap the vitality from relationships—whether at home or in the office—as sufferers focus inward on their unresolved issues and reach out to recruit supporters to their point of view.



● **Flight:** physically removing oneself from involvement. Face it; walking away or leaving is always an option. We can turn our backs on our friends, get divorced, or quit our job and head for greener pastures. How many times can we run away, however? It is better to learn how to mediate conflict.

● **Change oneself:** Move off one's position; shift one's view of the other party; "let it go." Sometimes, we can change ourselves by changing our perceptions of a situation. For example, you might try to achieve a positive outcome by altering your "story" or interpretation of another person's behavior. Of course, being forced to modify one's story often rattles. Moreover, what happens at those moments of truth, when all the attempts to reframe your perceptions simply do not work? The only option remaining is to confront conflict.

● **Confronting:** addressing the issue openly, candidly, and objectively; communicating with the other party. This approach is ideal. One executive we know uses a colorful metaphor to illustrate the concept. He likened the tendency to let disagreements fester to having a dead elephant's head in the middle of the room. It is unsightly, disturbing, and takes up a lot of space, but no one is willing to acknowledge its presence. It distracts people from more important work. The longer the elephant head remains, the worse its effect will be. The elephant head will not get up and go by itself. Only when people admit that this distasteful object is present and needs to be dealt with will they be able to remove it and move on to more productive activity.

If you decide to end your conspiracy of silence and work out your personal or business conflict by confronting, we recommend using the Four C's approach:

Connecting. In conflict resolution, timing and location are next to godliness. Before attempting to connect with another person—to establish a rapport that is conducive to discussing your mutual needs—always check with the individual to determine the best time and place to have a meeting. Do not forget to set the stage. Make sure you have privacy; will not be interrupted; are in a neutral, non-threatening environment; have scheduled enough time to cover all the salient points; and that both of you have had adequate opportunities to prepare for the dialogue. At work, this might mean repairing to a neutral conference room. At home, you might head for the nearest Starbucks.

Using the proper phrasing

Finding the right words to begin a potentially adversarial discussion can be difficult. We suggest using "partnering phrases," which convey the idea that you are ready to address the issue candidly and objectively and that you are serious about resolving it. For example, "I have some concerns about the way we are making decisions relating to one another

that I would like to explore with you," or "I have an issue with your attendance. You are not keeping up with your commitment. We cannot afford to let this continue," or "I am having some difficulties with the way you are managing the 'so-and-so' project. They really are going to get in the way if we fail to deal with them," or "I am uncomfortable with your approach to performance reviews, and I want to work my concerns out with you."

Clarifying. All the breast pounding and good intentions will not rescue a situation in which clarifying is not employed properly. Static is an agreement buster. Encourage the other party to open up about the real concerns he or she has. Describe the behaviors and the

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reasons you find them troubling. Choosing the right words is crucial. Try these phrases: "Let us take a minute to clarify what we hear each other saying about the way we have been making decisions," or "It is important for me to understand where you are coming from. What do I need to know to understand what has been happening with your attendance?," or "Regarding the assigned project, what feedback do you have for me about my contributions to the situation?," or "I want to know what you think. What is your point of view on performance reviews?"

Confirming. This entails summing up the facts, restating the issues to ensure that nothing has been misunderstood or omitted during your discussion. Equally important is a summary of the emotional progress that has been made—the commitment to finding a mutually agreeable solution. While both parties usually are eager to move to action at this point, investing a few additional minutes in confirming will make the next step much easier.

These are especially useful confirming statements: "Here is my understanding of our differences and where we are right now on the issue of the 'so-and-so' project," or "Do you have any other concerns about our performance review?," or "I really appreciate your willingness to work through this issue with me," or "I am optimistic that we can reach a compromise here."

Contracting. This is the final stage in managing disagreement by interaction. It entails finding the illusive win-win solution that both parties can commit to. Let us take this example from the business world. Deborah, the project manager at a major pharmaceutical company, has authorized overtime to keep a

key project on schedule. Sam, her supervisor, has just learned about this from another manager. Sam might sound something like this in confronting his subordinate: "Deborah, when you authorize overtime without telling me, you put me in a difficult situation. I am the one who is responsible for staying on budget, and if there are any cost overruns, I am the one who will have to explain them. From now on, I need you to come to me before authorizing any overtime."

Sam is using a three-part "I" response in which there are a trio of essential components: a description of the troublesome behavior; the disclosure of your feelings about the act; and stating the effect it has on you. In other words, the focus of the message is on "I" and not the other person.

At this point, Deborah is likely to respond with an explanation of her actions, such as: "You were away for the weekend; you said you could not be reached; and I had to make the call. I figured because you did not give me your phone number, you did not want me to bother you. If you want to make decisions, I have to be able to get in touch with you."

Now Deborah is the one asserting herself, making it clear that she, too, has needs. The negotiation should proceed, back and forth, until both Sam's and Deborah's needs are met. If Sam is not willing to give up his privacy by leaving a phone number, maybe he will agree to call Deborah for a daily update the next time he goes away. Or, he may decide to give Deborah more leeway, arranging for her to authorize overtime up to a certain number of hours without his approval.

Some useful contracting phrases are: "I think the whole team/family needs to be involved in budget decisions. What do you think?," or "Having you here four 10-hour days does not work for me, but having you come in at 10 a.m. and stay until 6 p.m. would. Does that work for you?," or "One thing we can do to move the project ahead is . . ." or "What would you prefer that I do differently in the future regarding the way I conduct my performance reviews?"

Managing conflict effectively is a learned behavior. Conflict-resolution skills are not part of any high school, college, or business school curriculum. Yet, the potential for discord exists whenever we interact with others. As Pat Parenty, senior vice president and general manager of Redken, U.S.A., points out, "Expecting people to resolve their differences without giving them conflict-management skills is like giving a computer to someone who has never seen one before and saying, 'Have fun using this.'" Do not count on having a good time. ★

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