

Learn to Embrace and Manage Conflict

By Michael J. Farlow, PhD

If I have one “strength” it is in *not* avoiding conflict. Some would say that at times I initiate it. However, I try hard never to make the engagement an emotional, vindictive, or insulting one. I am not sure how many people process information the way I do, but at least in my case, there are times when the only way I can learn or understand a particular issue and encourage creativity in problem solving is to start a controlled “difference of opinion.” I find that if I do not meet differences head on, I do not learn. Additionally, avoiding issues doesn’t make them go away; they continue to exist and grow whether one pays attention to them or not.

In today’s politically correct environment, we seem to be encouraged to get along under all circumstances. That is unrealistic, especially in a business setting in which revenue streams are vital and competition is high. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect human beings to always agree and equally unrealistic to expect new ideas and change to go unchallenged.

A colleague of mine — an experienced conflict coach with Conflict Connections, Patricia Porter, LCSW — supports the view that workplace conflict is bound to exist in every level of an organization. In fact, she says, it is necessary for growth, natural to human behavior, and normal. However, there are two important points to keep in mind: First, as I have mentioned, conflict is part of change and growth and need not be avoided. Second, and even more important, leaders and potential leaders need to know how to manage conflict productively. Conflicts can lead to intense emotional responses between people and organizations. Protracted and unaddressed

conflict within an organization leads to damaged work relationships; a culture of distrust; and an environment plagued by disgruntled employees, high turnover, and missed opportunities.

The key to managing conflict constructively is to identify and address issues early, before they reach a level of intractability. Patricia is fond of saying that leaders and their organizations need to become “conflict management competent.” Conflict management competent means you recognize the importance of managing and resolving conflict constructively. Conflict management competent leaders support a business culture of conflict-competence and practice it throughout their teams and organizations.

Suggestions

1. Remember that conflict is normal and productive but often needs to be managed.
2. Write down the “triggers” that are likely to produce non-productive conflict scenarios for you and ways to avoid them.
3. Think about your own attitude about conflict in the workplace; note how this attitude affects the way you engage with your staff and how you manage conflict among your colleagues and team members.
4. Do you avoid, confront, compromise, collaborate, or accommodate conflict? Reflect on how this approach influences how staff members perceive you as a leader.
5. Make a list of three of your biggest challenges in dealing with disputes.
6. Commit to action steps to address your challenges and develop conflict competency.
7. Encourage conflict management to be included in corporate planning (such as succession planning and leadership development).

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