

# CONFLICT COMPETENT LEADERSHIP

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Conflict is at the root of many leaders' best ideas, as well as at the core of their worst failures. When it is handled poorly it can cost organizations heavily in terms of wasted management time, turnover, lawsuits, and—in extreme cases—violence and sabotage. When it is addressed effectively, it can stimulate creativity and lead to better decision making. With all this at stake, it would seem natural that leaders would seek to hone their conflict management skills. When we talk to executives and managers who attend our programs, though, they almost always say that they have never formally learned how to handle conflict either in school or during their career. They tend to rely on their instincts or to use skills they've seen in others, and this is exactly what gets them and their organizations in trouble.

## Why Is Conflict So Difficult?

When asked to share words they think of to describe conflict, most leaders use negative terms such as *anger*, *frustration*, and *stress*. When they are asked how they generally deal with conflict, most say that they try to avoid it, forget it, or get back at the other person. When we ask them how well this combination works, they admit that it doesn't work well.

Yet a few describe conflict with words like *opportunity*, *energizing*, or *resolution*. They usually approach conflict by engaging with the other person using constructive approaches. These leaders actually suggest that they often achieve *better* results when faced with conflict.

Even with a positive attitude and a constructive approach, conflict is complex and challenging. Generally, we define conflict as situations where people believe they have incompatible goals, interests, principles, or feelings. These don't need to be actually incompatible; just the appearance is enough. Have you ever experienced a conflict that arose from misperceptions? Most people have.

Given this definition, it is clear that conflict is inevitable. We will constantly face situations where members of our team or individuals in the organization will have ideas about how to address issues that seem incompatible with our own. People in organizations have many differences in preferences, style, outlook, knowledge, values, and background. Leaders will experience these differences and the conflict they induce on a regular basis.

## Kinds of Conflict

There are also different kinds of conflict—some of which seem to lead to better results than others. One

kind, called *task* or *cognitive conflict*, focuses on issues and can result in open and rigorous debate of problems. Patrick Lencioni in his *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* suggests this is a critical area for team success. In the absence of this kind of conflict, you will miss out on the creativity that comes from discussing different approaches and the commitment that results from active participation in developing an answer, even one that differs from the participants' original ideas. This is exactly the type of conflict that is described by the leaders who use positive terms to describe it.

A second type of conflict is called *relationship* or *affective conflict*, and it focuses on finding out who's to blame for a problem more than (or instead of) how to solve it. Relationship conflict results in heated emotions, bad feelings, and unresolved issues. It is the kind of conflict described by people when they use negative terms.

Research has shown that task conflict can help teams achieve better results through increased creativity and improved decision making. On the other hand, relationship conflict has been shown to lead to poorer team results and morale. So the answer seems clear—use task conflict and avoid relationship conflict. Unfortunately, this is not so easy. Discussions that seem like productive debate can, in the blink of an eye, devolve into personal bickering and finger-pointing. In other words, task conflict morphs into relationship conflict.

Have you ever had someone criticize or question your ideas and then gotten mad at them for attacking you? This is the essence of what happens when task conflict

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goes astray. We perceive someone saying or doing something that we take to be incompatible with our interests, and we get angry at them. Our emotions are often triggered by motivations that we attribute to the other person. For instance, we may believe someone is trying to make us look bad for political gain or opposing our approach in order to get more resources for their group.

## Attributing Motivations

We know of a very volatile conflict between a National Hockey League head coach and a star player that illustrates the insidious power of attribution. The head coach joined the team in mid-season after the previous coach had been fired. The coach made it clear that playing time would be earned and there would be no “favorites.” One of the first of many decisions made by the new coach was to move the star player's reserved parking space at the team's facility. The star player felt demeaned and was angry. He interpreted this as a way for the new coach to demonstrate that he was the boss. The coach intended only to make decisions that would help create a team climate of fairness and objectivity. Over the course of the next few weeks, the player grew more convinced of the coach's devious intentions while the coach grew more dismayed with his star player's attitude. The conflict grew to such intensity that the general manager of the franchise intervened. There's a much longer story to tell, but suffice it to say that the coach and the player are still together and the team has won a Stanley Cup in the time since the initial conflict.

While attributed motivations may make perfect sense at the time, they are mere speculation. We don't know for certain what the other person's motives are. Typically, we attribute worse motivations to others than they actually have, as well as better motivations to ourselves than we actually have.

Emotions stem naturally from these attributions. If we feel someone is purposely out to frustrate our objectives, it is natural to get angry, especially if we have had run-ins with them in the past. At that point we are faced with a choice of how to respond.

When emotions are running high, people typically respond with classic fight-or-flight types of behaviors. If they are angry, they may lash out at the other person, demean them, or retaliate against them in various ways. When one strikes out at another, it usually triggers a retaliatory response from that other person. The conflict escalates and the problem grows. Worse yet, the parties often appeal to others to support them, and what once involved two people grows to involve many.

Someone who is frightened of or disturbed by conflict may try to stay away from the other person or give in to them to avoid having to deal with the issue. Our research suggests that this avoidance or “flight” pattern is the most frequently used, even among leaders. Avoidance cannot lead to resolution of the problem. Furthermore, the emotions involved are not addressed either. Negative emotions left unattended tend to fester until they come out at a later time. Once again the parties often talk to others to get their support, and conflict spreads.

Both flight and fight types of responses lead to relationship conflict and the destructive impact that it has on problem solving and morale. When leaders use their in-

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instincts to deal with conflict, they generally end up resorting to fight-or-flight behaviors and experiencing the downsides of relationship conflict. Worse yet, they lose out on the opportunities that can come from well-managed conflict.

## Managing Conflict Effectively

After analyzing the processes that lead to ineffective conflict management, we recommend leaders use a phased approach that emphasizes cooling down, slowing down, and engaging constructively. Cooling down focuses on staying balanced so that emotions that trigger destructive behaviors do not get out of hand. Slowing down provides time to apply a backup plan for when things begin to spin out of control. Engaging constructively moves conflict toward a search for solutions and away from an exercise in blame.

### Cooling Down

Cooling down starts with increasing your self-awareness about what gets you angry in the first place. We use the Conflict Dynamics Profile assessment instrument to measure people’s hot buttons. Hot buttons are behaviors in others that can upset you enough to throw you off balance. They can cause you to say or do something you later regret and that will probably escalate the conflict. Whether you use an assessment instrument or

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just reflect on the kinds of situations and behaviors in others that irritate you, greater self-awareness is an important first step in learning to cool down.

People have different hot buttons. Some may get upset dealing with an unreliable subordinate. Others may get irritated with a hostile colleague. Some have lots of hot buttons while others have very few. Whatever may be hot buttons for you, the next step is to think about why they are hot for you. Just the act of reflecting on them makes hot buttons less mysterious and begins to reduce a little of their heat. Although hot buttons are triggered by someone else's behavior, it is up to you to control your own reactions. You cannot count on changing the other person. But you can choose your own behavior. For instance, you can choose not to raise your voice in response when someone behaves in a way that irritates you. This does not mean letting someone get away with inappropriate behavior. It is more a matter of understanding, monitoring, and controlling your own emotions so that you can deal with them more effectively.

### **Slowing Down**

Staying cool is not so easy. If it were, we would have a lot less relationship conflict. In addition to working on cooling down, it is important to have a backup strategy for slowing things down when despite your best efforts you find yourself getting angry and about to react destructively. When emotions are aroused it becomes difficult to think clearly, so you need to wait until you cool down before moving ahead. A number of different approaches can help here.

Renowned negotiation expert William Ury advocates stepping back and trying to gain perspective, a process he calls "going to the balcony." The first part of the process involves withdrawing from the discussion to give yourself time to cool down. You can accomplish this by

using common techniques like taking slow deep breaths or thinking about something or someplace pleasant to distract your attention. As you begin to relax, you can reflect on what is happening, how you are feeling, and why you feel so strongly about the situation. You can also begin to look at alternative explanations for why people are acting the way they are. Perhaps their motivation is something other than just trying to upset you.

### **Engaging Constructively**

As you gain your composure we recommend constructively engaging the person or persons with whom you are having conflict. What does engaging constructively involve? We look at four key behaviors that can make a positive difference in resolving conflict. The first is called "perspective taking," and it involves trying to understand the other person's point of view and emotional responses to the conflict. In essence, it is trying to put yourself in their shoes. This includes thinking about alternative reasons why the person may be doing or saying particular things—reasons with a nonmalicious motive. It also involves lots of inquiry. The most effective perspective takers ask others how they see the differences or disagreements. Then they truly listen for understanding.

It is a challenge to listen to another person in a conflict context. First of all, you're apt to be sure that you are right, so why should you bother? Several reasons: First, you may actually learn something that you had not considered. At a minimum you will understand how and possibly why the other side sees the conflict in the way they do and why they feel the way they feel. Second, by listening to the other person, you may help lessen the tension. When people get a chance to tell their side of the story and have a sense that you can empathize with them, they feel valued and relieved. Finally, once they

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have been heard others will be more willing to listen to you. While there are no guarantees, you are more likely to get a fair hearing for your thoughts if you are first willing to listen to the other person. You may be concerned that by listening to the other person, it appears that you are somehow agreeing with them. If that bothers you, feel free to start your listening by saying, “I may or may not agree with what you have to say, but I certainly want to understand the situation from your perspective.”

A second behavior involves “expressing emotions.” Most people in work contexts are very reluctant to share how they are feeling about a conflict. They feel that it may cause them to look weak or may not be in keeping with their organizational culture. Yet when we ask people whether they have emotions related to conflict at work, they all agree that they do. But they also believe that they need to keep those emotions inside. When asked

how well they are able to do that, they usually admit—not too well. They say that the emotions either fester and eventually come rushing out in an angry outburst or leak out in the form of sarcastic, demeaning types of remarks. We encourage people to find an appropriate time and place, after any initial emotions have cooled down, to share feelings related to the conflict. The focus is on sharing your feelings, not on blaming others. This may take a form such as, “at yesterday’s meeting, when you said my team was not meeting the project deadlines, it made me angry because you didn’t mention that all teams were behind.” You want the other person to understand the relevant situation and how their behaviors made *you* feel. Disclosing your feelings is a powerful way to begin generating trust. On the other hand, if you essentially attack the other person, they will not be likely to listen to you and will come back with retaliatory responses of their own. The key is to describe your emotions, not act on them.

The third behavior concerns “reaching out.” When conflict has become stuck and communications have dwindled, someone needs to take the lead to get the conversation moving again. When two avoiders are involved in a conflict, neither party wants to engage. An effective leader is willing to take the risk to approach the other person, point out the deadlock, and encourage a resumption of efforts to find a solution. This can be uncomfortable and feel risky because it is possible the other person will reject the overture. At the same

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## CHAMPIONING ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT COMPETENCE

Personal conflict competence is an essential individual skill for leaders, but to gain the full benefit of it, they need to expand the use of these skills across their organizations. To be credible, leaders have to improve their own skills. They must be able to demonstrate control of their emotions and model the use of constructive conflict behaviors. They should also coach and mentor others to help them improve in these crucial areas.

Leaders must work to change the conflict climate in their organization. This includes making sure that the organization’s vision, mission, policies, procedures, performance measures, and reward criteria are in alignment with constructive conflict responses. Leaders can also ensure that employees have access to training programs to help them improve their conflict skills.

When leaders show the way and champion conflict competence in their organizations, they not only serve as effective risk managers by lowering costs associated with conflict, they also ensure that they can get the best kind of creativity and decision making that conflict can stimulate.

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time, conflict will not get resolved unless people work on it, and the cost of unresolved conflict is too high for a leader to ignore.

The final behavior leads to “creating solutions.” When people have been able to share and understand each others’ thoughts and feelings about a situation, they are in a position to be able to brainstorm solutions that can meet both sides’ needs. We tend to think of conflict as a win-lose situation, where one person gets everything while the other person gets nothing. But if people truly understand what each one cares about, they often have an opportunity to devise outcomes where both are satisfied. This goes far beyond just compromising or splitting the difference. It involves enlarging the pie before worrying about how to cut it. You do this by first understanding each other’s interests and then finding ways to

meet not only your needs but those of the other person as well.

## Learn and Practice New Approaches

While it takes work, leaders can improve their conflict competence. Reliance on instinct is not enough. Following the model set by others who may be ineffective at conflict is faulty logic. Learning and practicing new approaches and skills is always challenging. But that is what leaders do. They engage in challenges. There is too much to lose from waiting. And there’s so much to gain. Demonstrate your leadership by engaging in conflict constructively. We’re sure you have ample opportunities right now.



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