

Leading Conflict



John Felkins P.E.

All organizations exist on a continuum of conflict mastery. At one end open warfare prevents any progress, at the other end a “Conspiracy of Civility” exists that is equally pernicious or worse. Leaders and their organizations need to learn to see conflict in a new light, process it effectively and leverage healthy conflict to create growth.

Accelerant Consulting
Group Inc.

PH 615-852-8055

FX 888-854-4780

9/16/2009

The line of concrete trucks was growing ever longer as I watchfully stood over the testing technician. This was the second time he had run the test and it was failing again. I was going to have to tell the superintendent that I would reject this load of concrete. As the chief inspector on site, it was my responsibility to assure that the concrete met the specifications. I knew the contractor had a short temper and I wasn't looking forward to this. Nevertheless, I set out to locate him. I found him atop a concrete truck shouting orders and directing traffic (think Gen George S. Patton standing on a barrel in a muddy intersection). I yelled over the rumbling machinery that the load of concrete didn't pass. I was rejecting the truck. He vehemently began to argue his case, but I was resolute. The failed tests weren't even close. Once he realized I wasn't going to budge, he leapt off the truck and into my "personal space" (a la Billy Martin) yelling and calling my family and I several colorful names. Before it was over he had kicked dirt on me, I had rejected a few more trucks and learned a few more "colorful adjectives." As badly as this conflict was handled, (I was the picture of calm all the while not commenting on his lack of education or height, too often) the contractor and I were able to move beyond it and form a strong working relationship.

I learned a lot about conflict from this incident, its aftermath and by watching how different types of people handled themselves during such disagreements. While the contractor and I didn't hold much back, we did move past our outage. Organizational therapist Ken Utech states, "the issue is not whether conflict exists, it is about how effectively and how quickly conflict gets processed." All organizations exist on a spectrum of conflict "mastery." Some don't even acknowledge tensions exist, i.e. the "Conspiracy of Civility," and others allow chaotic and caustic dynamics to rule. Both are erosive and both are equally dangerous to productivity. Interestingly, the outcomes of both ends of the spectrum are nearly the same, only packaged differently. So, what does it take to strike a balance and not only handle conflict well but harness it to create growth? To improve in our conflict mastery, it will take skill, courage and some practice. While there is no formula for how to succeed in turning the tables on conflict, there are some principals that will act as blaze marks on this trail.

We must cast conflict in a new light.

No all conflict is bad. So how can we determine what is the good, the bad and the ugly of conflict? Firstly, for our purposes let's just assume *bad* conflict is going to get *ugly* (the movie metaphor is just too good to pass up). Bad conflict is personal, unproductive, and derisive. Bad conflict occurs when the issue at hand is not the main driving force of the disconnect. When past arguments, personality friction and hidden agendas (e.g. trying to make a colleague look bad in front of the boss) are the real reason for the fight, things are going badly. Watching a colleague that constantly plays devil's advocate is



instructive. People eventually give up talking to him because he doesn't appear to be invested in anything. It can't be purely an intellectual exercise, and just playing the devil's advocate will wear thin if it becomes a modus operandi. Good conflict exists when there is tension about the issues and when the conflict is not only a fruitful intellectual debate but it is also attended by people who care about the outcome. It's good to be passionate as long as we can stay in control of ourselves.

Leaders must venture into the unknown.

I've witnessed everything from massive inefficiency in the work place to people actually getting killed because an interpersonal conflict wasn't resolved properly. Clearly, we hope that lives are not at stake in your business; nevertheless, any conflict that is left smoldering and unaddressed is creating drag on your business. Like barnacles growing on the bottom of a sail boat, conflict eats into the performance of your business over time. Old grudges and turf wars are hard to uproot and deal with. Leadership must display the courage to venture into the areas where no one wants to go. The elephant in the room must be shot! Who is willing to take up the hunt? If not the leadership, then hope is fading fast. It never ceases to amaze me how much like a leader an organization will become. I've worked with clients that have leadership that is unwilling to address touchy issues and the whole organization began to walk on egg shells around the tough talks that they should have been having. A leader must be willing to leap into the unknown of what is bothering or hindering those that follow. This can be scary because we are much more comfortable staying in our office plus we don't actually know how things might blow up or if we will be negatively affected. But the reality is, if we don't go after the hard issues and deal with them until they are completely resolved, we aren't leading.

If it's personal, it's all over.

Once we feel the hair on the back of our necks stand up it's already very late in the conflict game. If we can't pull back from the brink, we will likely have to perform a lot of damage control. I know this to be true with my own family interaction. The angrier I get the "stupider" I get! Often times what appears to be the basis for the conflict really isn't the issue. Past baggage, our own issues and forces beyond the stated issue play into what's going on. Sometimes the problem is nothing more than the issue in front of us, but just as often the force behind the fight is some trivial or substantive phantom driver. Depending on the maturity and social skill of the person that we are in conflict with, issues as small as a bad commute to work, lack of sleep or a fight at home can play a huge, albeit un-confessed, role in why tension is rising and progress is being blocked. It is important for us to stay focused on the facts of the matter. If things have already gotten off track we must redirect the conversation back to the real issue without invalidating the person's feelings. Remember the

last time you tried to convince someone that they “shouldn’t feel that way!” That’s always great to hear isn’t it?

How to best defuse a bomb; set it off before someone else does.

We learn at a young age not to touch the stove when it’s hot. We also learn that conflict hurts and so we safely stay away. There are some that seem less affected by conflict and they are to an extent, but even the thick-skinned among us are affected by the people important to them. So, how do we make conflict less feared and more positive? I’ve already stated that leadership must have the courage to go where no one wants to go. Being willing to address two team members that are in conflict or have a hard talk is the first step. But, to get to second base someone has to be willing to go deeper and talk about the problems or failings that are unconformable to mention. This is getting ALL of the cards on the table. It needs to be clear that the last little bit of what’s driving the disconnect between two people gets resolved. Leaving something for later will only allow the problem to fester. We’ve all experienced the relief that comes from finally talking about the elephant in the room. The longer it takes to get to that conversation the more difficult it becomes. Again, this goes back to leadership behavior. If we, as leaders, turn a blind eye to problems or become defensive and take the position of a victim, (I’ve tried everything, I’ve had to strap this whole project on MY back, nobody listens to me anymore) then we don’t create the environment where it is safe for people to approach us with issues or where we have the credibility to assist others to process conflict.

Leveraging tension for growth.

Once we can embrace these principals and make good use of them we will be much more effective at processing conflict. Once our fear of conflict subsides and we begin to see it in a more positive light we can begin to apply some practical methods of how to process a disagreement. Why is it important for us to buy into the principals of healthy conflict before entering into tactics? Because, if we don't, it will become as obvious as day that we are trying to manipulate the situation. People are very keen to being “worked”. Just try it with your family and see what happens. So, what are the nuts and bolts of how to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear? Let’s take a gander.

Listening to understand before listening to be understood is a key skill in this process. If you can't control yourself you have little chance of being effective.

How to work through the disagreement:

- Recognize it for what it is and be self aware (“is it just me or is it getting hot in here?”). If you begin to slip into conflict with someone and you haven’t thought about your impact on the situation and what is at stake you are probably just reacting and not thinking things through. Not a good way to go. Think about how you are behaving and work to be objective. It’s ok to be passionate but base your argument on the issue, not the person (even if they are being a moron).
- Find the common ground. There are undoubtedly some aspects of what you are arguing about that you both agree on: the project needs to be done by the deadline, we are both working to help this client, neither of us wants to cut employees, etc. Try to build on the commonality and don’t major on the minors. Identify root causes and maintain boundaries. If you are struggling to understand the other person make sure you grasp what is really important to them and why they are resisting your view point. Once you know what you’re really dealing with, work hard to keep the conflict corralled. Don’t let it spill over into areas that are unrelated, even if they are a recent irritant.
- Work towards a shared vision. Letting go is hard to do, but some sacrifice will be required by both parties to move forward. As a leader, you will frequently be called to give more than others, but you can’t budge on ethics, bedrock strategy or issues that define who you and your organization are. All that said, you need to be better than those you lead at giving up preferences and personal taste in the effort to move forward. Once a shared vision is attained, reinforce it with crystal clear *understanding* by all parties involved. Just because you said it doesn’t mean they heard it.

By working through conflict in such a manner as to create a shared vision we actually strengthen the bond between people. Like a bone that has been broken and reset, the new bond has the potential of increased strength.

Being self aware, finding the common ground and working towards a vision that can be shared by all parties are cornerstones to being able to effectively process conflict. As a leader you must be able to see things from others’ perspectives and also not take yourself too seriously. Real mastery is achieved when a leader can move beyond the desire to win the argument to listening to all sides and achieving progress by guiding the stakeholders to work together.

John Felkins PE

Accelerant Consulting Group Inc.

Site: www.accelerantconsulting.com

Email: john@accelerantconsulting.com