Keeping Conflicts Constructive

If you've ever worked with a team of people, you know that conflict is inevitable. But you may not know that conflict can be constructive.

All too often, disagreements among group members aren't resolved in a healthy manner. People may leave meetings feeling hurt, misunderstood or alienated. Conflicts linger, creating tension, and disrupting work.

While we can't stop disagreements from happening, we can use conflicts as assets—to strengthen relationships, make sounder group decisions and motivate members.

Using conflict constructively requires that all group members practice basic ground rules of conflict management. Without mutual practice of these principles, conflict can become destructive and downright ugly. Or just as damaging, controversial issues may be sidestepped just to keep the peace. If your team has spiraled down this abyss in the past, it may take some time and effort to correct the problem.

But these ideas will work if the group is committed to them. To make conflict constructive, each member should follow these guidelines:

- Express disagreement.

- Be sensitive.

- Criticize the idea, not the person.

- Don't be defensive.

Express disagreement.

Group members must first decide they're going to be honest with one another. This means that when they have differing views, they'll express those disagreements instead of remaining silent. (This isn't an invitation, however, to say whatever you want—we'll discuss that shortly.)

But by not speaking up when you disagree, you deprive the group of potentially valuable insight that might redirect how problems are solved or important decisions are made. You could even say that by not speaking up, you're deceiving the group because your silence may be seen as agreement.

Group leaders need to encourage open forums, where disagreement is freely expressed. If leaders seem insecure about contrary ideas being expressed, they can't expect much honesty among members.

In turn, group members are likely to come away feeling dissatisfied because their views aren't being heard. It also greatly reduces the effectiveness of decision making when all ideas aren't considered.

Be sensitive.

As you express disagreements, be aware that the words you choose can affect listeners positively or negatively.

For instance, in a class on group communication that I was teaching, a woman made this bold statement: "Men don't listen well in conversation." It may have been an honest expression of her opinion, but it certainly wasn't sensitive to the men in the group.

Instead she could have made a general statement such as, "I find it difficult when someone I'm talking to doesn't listen well." This captures the essence of what she wants to say, but doesn't push emotional buttons for those in the group. And pushing emotional buttons will inevitably derail you from the topic at hand and create unnecessary tension among group members.

Considering your words carefully is more than just being politically correct. It's extending consideration to those around you. Your disagreements have a greater chance of being heard when you phrase them sensitively.

Criticize the idea, not the person.

Express your disagreements in a way that doesn't devalue the person with whom you disagree. For an example of how this can be done well, here's an anecdote from a meeting I attended recently:

A man had just finished explaining a project proposal to a committee. A committee member who was opposed to the proposal responded, "One significant flaw in your proposal is that it excludes lower income families from participating in the program, due to cost. What can be done to include them?"

The member who raised the question may have wanted to say something like, "Who's the bonehead who came up with this idea?" Instead, he addressed the issue and didn't attack the person. As a result, the discussion moved forward productively.

If your goal is to use conflict to build a more cohesive group, don't allow personal attacks or name calling to infiltrate your relationships. That will only escalate conflicts and cause people to choose sides.

If conflicts degenerate into personal attacks, you need to interrupt the conversations, make your point about such behavior being counterproductive, and ask the people to restate their disagreements by focusing on the issues. This will set a precedent for discussions. Practice this as often as needed, and group members will learn to express their disagreements openly because they'll feel safe from verbal attacks.

Don't be defensive.

When you're on the receiving end of disagreements, you can feel defensive even if the people aren't attacking you.

But often, the people disagreeing simply aren't grasping your point. So rather than leaping to defend your positions, listen carefully to other people's remarks. Ask them to summarize your main points. This gives you chances to pinpoint possible misunderstandings and clarify your positions.

This is a difficult skill to master. People don't like to be told they're wrong—including me.

At a workshop I was conducting, a participant interrupted me and accused me of being narrow. My first thought was to defend my point and move on with my material. Instead, I took a break from my presentation and asked her some questions.

"What is your main concern with the idea I'm presenting?" I asked. She responded with several objections, and the more she talked, the more she seemed to distort what I said.

So I asked, "What did you hear me say?" She paraphrased my comments in her own words—to which I replied, "I think you misunderstood what I was trying to say."

Then I restated my point concisely, asked her if this made sense and moved on. I diffused the conflict by entering into it instead of trying to sidestep it.

By asking questions of those who disagree with you, new ideas and suggestions get thrown into conversations. These may lead to creative solutions that hadn't been considered.

And if your idea eventually falls flat—so what? By inviting discussions, you've moved the processes forward in positive ways that defensive reactions could never have accomplished.

You can make conflicts work for your team, but it takes a commitment from all group members. Each person must agree to honestly state disagreements, in a sensitive manner that focuses on the ideas, not the people. Approached in this way, conflicts can be one of your greatest assets.

Gilles, G. (2010, Reviewed) *Keeping conflicts constructive.* Raleigh, NC: Workplace Benefits.

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