

Managing Conflicts: The Missing Competency in Leadership

Nobody likes to talk about conflicts.

Yet to be effective leaders, we must learn how to manage them well. Conflicts are inevitable. We neglect this reality to our peril. Many leaders have been derailed because of their incompetence in managing conflicts that exist in their organizations.

A. Meta's Key Perspectives

1. Conflicts are neutral.

Conflicts often conjure up negative thoughts such as arguments, fights, war, and anger. On the other hand, conflicts can have positive values too. Here are some positive outcomes when conflicts are managed well.

- Greater understanding
- New ideas
- Healthier relationships

Conflicts can have positive results. Hence, conflicts are in themselves neutral. They are neither negative nor positive. It is how we manage conflicts that will determine their outcomes.

2. Conflicts are inevitable.

We must expect conflicts in life. Why? For one, people are different. We have different opinions, values, personalities and ego-needs. As a result, conflicts are bound to happen.

3. Absence of Conflicts is not necessarily a sign of organizational health.

Some leaders think that an organization is healthy when there are no conflicts. Conflicts are swept under the carpet. Some leaders create such a climate of fear within the organization that any sign of conflict is instantly snubbed out or denied.

This is most evident when organizations have toxic leaders. They surround themselves with lackeys. Therefore, the absence of conflicts is not necessarily a sign of organizational health. In fact, we should become suspicious when people are always agreeable. Hilary Burrock said, "Every individual has an instinct for conflicts. At least all healthy individuals."

B. Setting The Climate

Managing conflicts effectively involves setting the right climate.

1. Climate of shared vision and core values

Shared vision and core values are important. This provides the big picture during crisis. Vision and core values must be believed, communicated, inculcated and practiced consistently.

2. Climate of trust

Make time to build trust. When there is no trust, people become suspicious and cynical. Trust must be earned. This means leaders must keep promises, treat people fairly, appreciate contributions, and show kindness.

3. Climate of valued relationships

Some leaders are so goal driven and task focused that they neglect relationships in the process. Their staff becomes a means for their own ends. They are insensitive to staff needs and struggles. People must be valued and respected for who they are and not just for they can do.

4. Climate of learning

Some leaders rule by fear and intimidation. Mistakes are not tolerated. How we manage mistakes and failures determines the climate for learning. Creativity is the result of an accepting and learning climate.

C. Meta's Eight Golden Rules

Besides setting the right climate for managing conflicts, we must also have proper rules of engagement. Here are Meta's Eight Golden Rules.

Rule 1: No personal attack.

Describe behaviors that you disapprove. Name-calling and blaming are most destructive. Fix the problem and not fix blame.

Rule 2: Take responsibility.

The corollary to Rule 1 is taking personal responsibility. The buck must stop at our defined role and responsibility. We need to take responsibility for mistakes and learn from them. Becoming defensive only exacerbate a conflict.

Rule 3: Listen actively.

Seek to understand the other person's perspective before giving your opinion. Listening actively is one of the most effective competencies in conflict management. It prevents misunderstanding. In 1995, Fortune Magazine inducted six CEOs into their National Hall of Fame. All of them share one common characteristic. They are great listeners. A new term was coined for them: "Hearacholics."

Rule 4: Focus on issues

Negative emotions can run wild during a conflict. We feel anger and frustration when our goals are blocked and expectations are not met. One positive way of dealing with negative emotions is keeping focus on the issues at hand.

Rule 5: Choose your fight

Some leaders love to fight. They are competitive and fight to win. They are micro-managing when they keep picking fights with their staff over trivial matters.

We must be strategic when it comes to potential conflicts. Decide if the issue at hand is worth fighting. Some issues are really not worth fighting. In some conflict situations, "Giving in" is wise. If we fight all the time, we will lose credibility when there is really something worth fighting about.

Rule 6: One issue at a time

Tag team fighting is messy and destructive. Too many issues derail effective conflict management. Prioritize the issues that may cause conflict and settle issues one at a time.

Rule 7: Time your fight

Timing is everything. When emotions run wild, take a break. Take time out and come back when things are less heated up. Do you know we become irrational when our heartbeat goes beyond a hundred?

Rule 8: Realign to supra-ordinate goals

Sometimes, leaders need to call attention to the greater goal, the bigger picture, and the long-term objective of the organization. It is very easy to be myopic, self-absorbed and department-focused. Effective leaders help staff and followers see the supra-ordinate goals in their attempt to manage conflicts in the workplace

Conflict can be a positive force in your organization. Learn to manage it well.

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