
Conflict management and mediation: key leadership skills for the millennium

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Abstract

Conflict is generally thought of as an obstruction to progress, but it need not be. There cannot be development if there is only one opinion. The problems come when people are defensive about their views, and feel threatened by opposing ones. Another way is to welcome differing outlooks as fresh blood to an old idea. Then differing opinions cross-fertilise and lead steadily forwards. However, the tendency to protect one's ideas from outside influence can be very strong, leading to bitter conflict. In the new, flatter organisation, conflict is inevitable. A key leadership task is to create a climate where conflict is managed not avoided. Mediation and/or training in how to transform destructive conflict into constructive conflict is likely to be the development challenge at the start of the new millennium.

Conflict is part of life

Conflict is a fact of life, in organisations just as everywhere else, as people compete for jobs, resources, power, acknowledgement, and security. Dealing with it is difficult because it arouses such primitive emotions. People feel threatened (rightly or wrongly), and this creates a version of the age-old stress response – fight or flight.

The urge to fight expresses itself as hostility, the urge for flight as withdrawal, neither of which is helpful in the modern organisational context. Energy becomes internally focused on negative politics and “get you later” games. This detracts both from customer needs and collaborative effort. Colleagues become competitors, and opportunities for shared learning are blocked.

Some organisations seem to regard this as normal, so little training is given to managers in how to deal with it effectively. They tolerate dysfunctional teams that operate in rigid non-collaborative ways. The qualities of group maintenance, collaborative effort and shared learning may be quietly admired, but they are not explicitly rewarded.

This seems to be worse in the new, less hierarchical, business structures where the opportunities for self-development are less clearly defined. People have to think differently, investing in employability and lateral development rather than the career ladder. This can lead to a self-protective attitude where knowledge is jealously guarded, with the assumption that to share it would be to lose it. So, instead of collaborative effort, there is conflict and retreat into old comfort zones. This might seem like an easier option in the short term, as it lays aside all sorts of anxieties. But they are only laid aside, dormant – they can awake and cause trouble at any time.

There needs to be a change of attitude. Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Properly managed, it can be a creative force for the business and the individual. If we regard differences of opinion as valuable sources of cross-fertilisation they begin to enrich our experience. People often say in retrospect that difficult relationships (i.e. those that made them think deeply about themselves, the

relationship and their situation) were the ones that made them grow.

This only happens if the conflict is dealt with in a constructive way. There is often an urge to protect others, but this is misguided. Censoring information is paternalistic, and does not show true caring. There is a need for honest speaking, neither covering up the differences, nor diverting them into personal criticism. It means talking factually about how the situation is affecting them, without degenerating into blame or self-pity. It means feedback being given upwards as well as downwards, and an end to possible admonishment for telling management what they need to know rather than what they want to hear.

This is difficult to achieve even at the early stages of differing opinions, before emotions have become entangled with reason. Sometimes, the situation gets so difficult that an objective third party, a conflict mediator, is needed.

When mediation is necessary – a case study

I was called in on a case where the conflict had escalated to the point that it was depressing the morale of the whole company. Some thought it would be simpler to terminate the employment of one or both disputants, but both were valuable in their own right. It was hoped that I could bring them to agreement.

When I was first briefed about the level of antagonism between the disputants, Chris and Alex, it seemed like an impossible task. It was a classic case of each party advancing their own position, and neither party even enquiring into alternatives, let alone considering them. Certainly, they were unlikely to reach agreement. I had to make it clear to the company that agreement was not necessarily the objective. The important thing was that they should explore their differences in a business-enhancing way.

Conflict can be positive. More than one opinion on the same subject can enlarge ideas and lead to new ones – but only if the people involved can disagree in a constructive way.

Edward de Bono (1986) said: “Disputants are the worst people to solve their own dispute”. This was certainly true with Chris and Alex, whose level of distrust of one another was such that they could barely speak at all. The original issues had been lost in mutual accusation and personal denigration. In both

cases, early childhood experiences had shaped their world view.

As mediator, my key objective was to get them to look at the problems objectively, instead of allocating blame. It was important that they accepted one another’s viewpoint as valid (without necessarily agreeing) and tried to understand. From there, they needed to affirm a common purpose. If it was to work, they had to achieve more than superficial compliance. The goal was to find ways of communicating with mutual trust and a genuine desire to set an example to others.

As a first stage, I wanted to find out the roots of their problems. I also explored differences in their personalities using psychometric testing (MBTI), the results of which confirmed they were like oil and water. Not only did they differ on how problems should be solved, but they also had very different profiles in terms of how they processed information.

Their work styles were also different. Chris had a strong work ethic that demanded harder and harder self-drive, to the point where less was actually achieved because the work was so relentless. Alex relied on logical processes, and wanted to achieve perfection, via logic, in the tasks performed. This led to an extraordinary single-mindedness. Interestingly, both had similar early backgrounds of adversity, which shaped these drivers.

It is clear from this that neither was “to blame”. They both had basically valid work styles, but they were being carried to excess, especially under stress.

The mediation took place in stages. First, I saw Chris and Alex separately, to establish ground rules for the mediation process and to enable me to gain an in-depth understanding of each individual in terms of motivators, values, aspirations, fears and strengths. I also had to let them know how the conflict was affecting them, and to reinforce the idea that their strengths had become weaknesses, under the stress of conflict.

I also saw other team members, to get their opinions of Chris and Alex’s strengths and weaknesses. I discussed these opinions with each of the disputants, and prepared them to participate in a session with the teams to discuss the implications of the feedback.

After seeing Chris and Alex separately, I saw them together. My role was to facilitate the discussion, make sure they kept to the ground rules, and to keep the discussion on the subject of the dispute, not of one another.

With this foundation, it was possible to coach them in communicating successfully with one another. I developed the PRIDE model for this:

- *Pause.* Before launching into a verbal tirade, consider what your motives are. Try to see the other person as a potential ally. If you just want the other person to feel bad, this will only lead to defensiveness and deepen the conflict.
- *Report.* Say specifically what is happening. Be as objective as possible. Avoid generalisations such as “You always ...” Avoid guessing at the other’s motives, or accusing them of bad faith. Describe their behaviour.
- *Impact.* Describe the effects of their behaviour on you (“I feel ... when you ...”).
- *Different.* Describe what you need to be different. Make sure your request is reasonable, i.e. within the power of the other person to meet.
- *End benefit.* Spell out the positive consequences/benefits of the change you request.

Initially Chris and Alex were encouraged to speak through me. The conflict had become so emotionally charged that as soon as they started talking to one another the communication degenerated into attack and defend. The tension was very evident. However, by insisting that they spoke through me I was able to slow the communication down and get them to listen to each other at a deeper level.

The turning point in the process was when I asked each to talk openly about their backgrounds. Although they were reluctant at first, this process enabled them to develop empathy for one another. They had found a point of contact, of overlapping interest and understanding.

I have found in other conflict mediations that this sudden insight into one another has created the basis for working together. Invariably, most movement takes place when each party starts to empathise with the other’s underlying fear, because at the end of the day it is fear, which drives most antagonistic conflicts.

Managing conflict is necessary for effective teamwork

It is ironic that many of today’s organisations are generating fear – the fear of loss of security. Security may not come back on the agenda

in terms of the organisation being the provider. People need to develop their internal security, i.e. their personal resources for change. The danger is that this attitude will degenerate into self-interest at the expense of the collective good.

What is required is a self-interested altruism. This means that individual goals are recognised as important, but it is also recognised that the only way to achieve those goals, and the goals of the organisation, is through collaborative effort. Self-interest may be a basic biological driver, but altruistic self-interest is much better for organisations than antagonistic or defensive self-interest.

The responsibility of the organisation may not be to offer long-term security, but to create a climate of altruistic self-interest by ensuring that individual needs and corporate goals are aligned, by actively enabling people to resolve conflicts. Too often organisations just let conflicts fester or escalate until removing one or other of the disputants seems the only solution. More typically, people find their own way of manoeuvring themselves in the organisation so that they avoid the other protagonist or find ways of marginalising or excluding them. This is totally irrational behaviour in terms of the needs of the business. Such conflicts may even become institutionalised so that we end up with disparate departmental silos working to their own goals and rarely communicating with each other – all very business limiting.

The answer is not platitudes from above that we all need to work together. Nor is it exhortations to work for the common good, without acknowledging the needs of individuals. There needs to be training given in how to deal with conflict constructively. There is an irony in that this training will inevitably arouse emotions if it is really dealing with the key issues. This is a real challenge to trainers, who are subject to the same reluctance to face issues as everybody else. Everybody shares these difficulties. The challenge of dealing positively with conflict is also the challenge of effective teamworking in the organisation, and team leadership is more critical now than ever before.

Reference

- DeBono, E. (1986), *Conflicts – A Better Way to Resolve Them*, Penguin, London.