

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### Rethinking Conflict

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

**I** don't like conflict." This is the most common opening to our coaching sessions. Yet conflict is a desirable, necessary response to the many challenges of today's super-competitive, rapidly evolving marketplace. In fact, organizations that do not regularly experience conflict – or handle it poorly – may be headed for serious trouble. Do you or your organization fall into the "don't like conflict" category? If so, it is time to rethink conflict.

This does not mean encouraging the turf wars, competing agendas and "I win, you lose" approaches that generate constant but unproductive friction. Rather, the goal is to build a culture in which leaders intentionally create and use open, honest – even heated – dialogue about important issues to improve results and relationships.

#### **Why is Conflict So Challenging?**

By definition, conflict means "doing battle." The idea of doing battle against colleagues with whom you are trying to build cooperative, trusting relationships seems counterintuitive, if not outright uncomfortable. Yet expecting that conflict will not arise is unrealistic given the diversity of thought and perspective demanded by our complex environment. Indeed, today's rapidly changing marketplace is an almost ideal recipe for conflict, with organizations constantly facing

ambiguous situations in which the outcome is critical and the risks are high.

Nonetheless, many leaders find the combined intellectual and emotional nature of conflict challenging. Some readily separate the two, actively engaging in fervent debate and relishing the role of critic. Others sense impending disagreement and run the other way. In our experience, about 20% of leaders enjoy conflict, 20% avoid conflict and the remaining 60% feel ambivalent.

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#### **Why is Conflict So Important?**

Conflict is a vital strategy for accelerating learning and change. Especially when the stakes are high, organizations that do not foster open, honest dialogue tend to stagnate under the pressures of "groupthink." To paraphrase an old adage, "If we always agree, some of us aren't needed."

As a leader, you are responsible for using conflict, proactively engaging in

StraightTalk dialogue around important issues such as individual accountability and collective responsibility for allocating resources, improving results and building relationships. Start by looking at each conflict situation as an opportunity for innovative solutions that achieve better results and stronger relationships.

Then establish a clear process for surfacing important concerns. In general, the more significant an issue, problem, opportunity or threat, the more important it is to invite and use conflict to ensure that as many competing views as possible are raised, and to wrestle to the best solution.

After you have identified the issues, determine how your organization will use conflicting views collaboratively. In fact, collaboration – not competition – is the most effective approach for using conflict to accelerate learning and change.

#### **Collaborative Conflict**

Collaboration and conflict may sound contradictory, especially in light of our earlier definition of conflict as "doing battle." Yet used properly, conflict can significantly enhance collaboration, which strengthens relationships and improves results.

You can encourage collaborative conflict by defining "rules" about the behavior standards to which individuals will be held in conflict situations.

These may include:

- ◆ Opening each discussion – be it among 2, 12 or 20 people – by clarifying a common strategic objective. This reminds participants that they are all on the same team, working towards shared goals.
- ◆ Focusing on issues by putting your ideas, information and opinions on the table in an honest and straightforward manner, and insisting that others do the same. This includes checking all game-playing at the door.
- ◆ Encouraging and rewarding disagreement – even passionate dissent – and different perspectives. This can be as simple as complimenting a group on a very stormy, very productive meeting.
- ◆ Seeking to understand the other party's issues, information and opinions before trying to have them understand yours.
- ◆ Considering others' rights, but standing up for your own.
- ◆ Approaching the situation and individuals with respect, and demanding it in return.
- ◆ Understanding that you not only have the right to express your views, but also the responsibility to do so.
- ◆ Actively listening to hear and understand.

### The Conflict Dialogue

Dialogue is a defining characteristic of successful conflict. Yet too many leaders rely on "serial monologue," partly because their active listening skills tend to be underdeveloped. If this describes you, try working on the following verbal active listening skills:

- ◆ Ask open-ended rather than "yes" or "no" questions. For example, "Why do you think...?"
- ◆ Paraphrase in your own words. Try "If I understand you correctly..."
- ◆ Test for understanding and a common language. For example, "So when you say \_\_\_\_\_, do you mean \_\_\_\_\_?"
- ◆ Empathize to enhance emotional and intellectual comprehension. Try "I understand. I've felt that way myself."

Non-verbal active listening skills are equally important:

- ◆ Watch posture. A steady, open stance usually indicates acceptance. Fidgety, closed posture expresses disagreement.
- ◆ Facial expressions are revealing. Does a person look friendly or stern? Is his face open or closed?
- ◆ Eye contact is a critical cue. Does someone refuse to look directly at you? Is there understanding or confusion in her eyes?
- ◆ Tone of voice indicates receptivity. Is the volume loud or soft? The pace fast or slow? Does the tone communicate patience or irritation?
- ◆ Do physical and verbal cues match to indicate true understanding?

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### Using Conflict: Up, Down, Across, Outside

When used appropriately and collaboratively, conflict is a fundamental strategy for influencing key stakeholders up, down, across and even outside your organization.

*Up.* Conflict "up" can be tricky, especially if your superior does not welcome open, honest dialogue about issues and opportunities. However, there is often an even greater risk in not disagreeing with an unwise decision. Following the wrong direction simply to avoid confrontation is shirking your individual leadership responsibility.

*Down.* Using conflict with subordinates carries the special burden of managing position power. As their superior, you could simply dictate a course of action – at the

risk of quashing disagreements that would likely offer valuable ideas and insight. Instead, try eliciting conflicting ideas from a group of subordinates with diverse knowledge, styles and expertise.

*Across.* Conflict with peers can also be risky because it is important to build relationships by being a champion more often than a critic. Although rallying around a peer who has a proposal on the table will help strengthen your relationship, you are also responsible for improving results by honestly expressing your views.

*Outside.* It can be difficult to know when and if it is appropriate to engage external stakeholders in conflict. Yet disagreements will inevitably arise with investors, customers, vendors, regulators and the communities in which you do business. Recognizing those occasions and striving for a collaborative approach is a key success factor.

Do you avoid conflict because energetic disagreement feels like personal criticism? If so, you may be denying yourself the better ideas, better responses and better results that conflict can offer, and depriving your organization of a path to accelerated learning and change.

It is time to rethink conflict and give it the importance it deserves. By using it to address important issues, enhance collaboration and ensure honest, open dialogue, you can proactively transform it into a valuable leadership tool that improves relationships – and results. [HK](#)

### Recommended Resources

*Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Roger Fischer, William Ury and Bruce Patton. Penguin Books, 1991

The Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument and supporting interpretations.

*The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*, Jerry B. Harvey. Jossey-Bass, 1996

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