EFFECTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

HOW TO HANDLE DISPUTES IN YOUR ORGANISATION
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OH, THAT’S WHY!

NO one particularly enjoys conflict in personal relationships. Yet if we ask people around us if they think some conflict is necessary in healthy relationships, chances are, they’ll say yes. So it’s a strange scenario. We know relationships become stronger when we encounter and deal with conflict, yet when a conflict occurs, we get uncomfortable. We get overly emotional or we pretend there isn’t a conflict at all!

I just read a very interesting paper called Conflict in Adult Close Relationships: An Attachment Perspective by Paula Pietromonaco, Dara Greenwood and Lisa Barrett, which explains why different people react differently to relationship conflicts. According to the researchers, it has to do with the “attachment style” of individuals, which is the way we form bonds with others.

If a person has a secure attachment style, they don’t view conflicts as threats to the relationship. As a result, they are able to communicate openly and use various strategies to negotiate a resolution. For individuals with a preoccupied attachment style, meaning they can be anxious in their relationships, conflict triggers fears of abandonment. Consequently, when conflict occurs, they display intense emotion. “Excessively focus on their own concerns” and “they may have difficulty attending to the information conveyed by their partners.”

Others have a dismissing-avoidant attachment style. These folks are independent and self-reliant, possibly because they believe others will be emotionally unresponsive to them. Consequently, when conflict occurs, they display intense emotion. “Even more focus on their own concerns” and “they may have difficulty attending to the information conveyed by their partners.”

When conflict occurs, individuals with this attachment style may sense pressure to behave in a way that demonstrates emotional closeness, such as talking about their feelings. They aren’t used to this and see it as a threat on their independence. So what may occur is a deactivation of their attachment system. As a result, they either “withdraw or downplay the significance of the conflict”.

So here’s a quick self-awareness exercise. How do you react to relationship conflicts, especially at the workplace? We all work in highly diverse teams and conflict is inevitable in such an environment. Are you an avoider? Do you get highly emotional or do you downplay the significance of the conflict? Can you work on this?

Conflict especially in the workplace doesn’t go away just by ignoring it. Tensions start to build up and respect for each other slowly starts to lessen. Deal with it as soon as possible.

1. DON’T AVOID IT
Conflict especially in the workplace won’t go away just by ignoring it. Tensions start to build up and respect for each other slowly starts to lessen. Deal with it as soon as possible.

2. FIND THE SOURCE
What is the source of this conflict? When did it start? Questions like these will help you resolve the conflict better so that you can address it immediately. Dig deep and share concerns and frustrations with each other.

3. FIND A SOLUTION
Be willing to cooperate with each other to find a solution to the conflict. We all have different opinions and ideas so in order to resolve the issue, there needs to be a common ground where everyone can agree on. Both parties need to compromise to move forward from this.

4. KEEP CALM
Don’t explode or show your temper. Stay as calm as you possibly can. Take deep breaths to release your frustration.

5. BE WILLING TO LISTEN
Listen and understand the other side of the story before defending yourself. Observe the feelings and spoken words being expressed to understand the other party.
A number of years ago, while working in the United States and having dinner in a small city after work with a colleague, a cockroach whizzed past a woman sitting next to us and went under her table.

She got up and started running away at which point, many customers panicked by her reaction. As she was jumping and screaming, the cockroach moved to another table and yet another woman joined the scream and jump and run-for-dear-life club.

But as this was happening, the waiter (with a smile) calmly went over to the table where the cockroach had now settled, and started observing the insect:

Within seconds, he grabbed the bug and quickly took it away much to the delight of the two women and many other jittery diners. In fact, a few people clapped their hands in thanks to the waiter.

As my colleague and I were finishing dinner, we started discussing this amusing situation. A number of questions were asked. Among them were:

- Was the cockroach latable for the melodramatic performance of the two women?
- If so, why then was the waiter not distressed or hysterical?

As we discussed this, a huge realisation dawned on us—in many cases, it is not external factors that disrupt or cause chaos in our world, but rather our inability to handle such situations.

In many scenarios, we end up reacting to a situation rather than responding to it. Just think back to a time when you got boss yelled at you or your spouse told you off. Did you react in histrionics or did you respond as needed to fuse the flame?

We sometimes react to the tiniest issues. Imagine being late for a meeting and driving in a rush to get to the meeting on time. But the traffic light is red. Does the red light cause you to get so angry and frustrated that you start reacting “crazily” as the women who encountered the cockroach did?

Is it not the traffic light that disrupts you but rather your inability to handle the disturbance caused in your mind. So, why do we react to the light?

**It’s a CHOICE**

Everything we do, we do by choice. Everyday we make thousands of choices from what to eat, say or wear. So what is the difference between reacting and responding?

Two different choices—a positive and a negative choice. Choosing to respond positively can dramatically alter your life.

For example, if you are having dinner and your son knocks down and breaks a precious vase on your table, you have two choices—to react or respond.

**CHOICE 1: REACT**—We allow our emotions to guide us and thoughts of anger, pain and loss flash through our minds. We quickly react with yelling, anger, physical abuse and other negative reactions.

**CHOICE 2: RESPOND**—This is a more positive approach. And it begins by putting some distance between you and the situation. A person who responds to a situation will never let emotions get the better of him or her. In the case of the son breaking the vase, the first thing would be to see if everyone is OK and if anyone is hurt. Quickly respond to anyone hurt. Then calmly ensure that no one walks on the tiny pieces of glass. Quickly mobilise people to ensure that the fragments are cleaned up. Once you are calm, you can then discipline or discuss the situation with your son.

**FROM REACTIVE TO Responsive**

So, how do you move from being reactive to responsive? The same way you develop any other skill—practice, practice, practice. First, tell yourself daily that you are going to become a responsive person and never react. Ideally, you should write this down and come up with a plan. Here are some other things you can do to improve your responding ability:

1. Imagine circumstances where you would be prone to react and re-enact these with a responsive manner.
2. Learn to breathe when you are in a situation where you need to react or respond, first breathe. By focusing on your breathing instead of instantly reacting, we will bring our thinking under control. We may eliminate thoughts that gear us up, releasing them with each breath and regaining our concentration.
3. Write out the words “Respond vs. React” on sticky notes and put them in places where you’ll constantly see them. These reminders are crucial for us to remind ourselves of our commitment.
4. Reflect at the end of each day on your reaction vs reflection score. Look back at each of your “situations” and give yourself a score from one to five. This reflection helps you to learn from your reaction mistakes and teaches you to be better at responding.
5. Finally, always create a gap between you and the stimulus, either time or distance, and then ask yourself one of the following questions:
   - **a)** Is what just happened (the situation/issue) a big deal that will ruin your life? If you really look at your situation (i.e. stuck in a traffic jam, son broke a vase or boss scolds you), it will probably not be something that will be a big issue in the scheme of your whole life.
   - **b)** Was the situation just an accident or intentional? People generally never set out to cause unnecessary hurt to you. If it was just an accident, getting angry won’t enable you to get back your vase. Sure, your son should have known better but getting angry won’t solve any problems.
   - **c)** Is this worth ruining relationships or friendships? Some of us get personally attached to things but relationships are far more important to salvage. A little unnecessary “reaction” instead of a response can cause significant friendships to go sour.

As you ask these questions, put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Ask yourself how would you like to be treated if you had committed the “accident” instead of the other party? Be compassionate and listen before you respond.

Many of us know that we should not react but we can’t stop ourselves. It’s just human nature. So, we must practise responding. Remember, reactions are instinctive; responses are intellectual. And if you do end up reacting (which we do all so very often!), then quickly apologise.

It may be shocking to some of us but we are NOT perfect and we are always prone to the dumb “reaction” instead of the wise “responding”, so learn to apologise often.

Choose not to react but if it happens, remember that apologies are the best medicine for reacting!

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By ROSHAN THIRAN
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The story about a father who saw his son scratch his newly polished shoes and wished that the father had learnt to respond instead of reacting could prevent this.

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MANAGING conflict among team members is not easy. It is one of the roles of a manager. It is, however, an essential responsibility of the role, and there will come a time when you have to deal with some form of conflict in the organisation.

In this article I would like to highlight some areas that managers should consider when having to deal with conflict in their teams.

INTERVENING QUICKLY IN CASES OF CONFLICT

Managers should never shy away from stepping in when they realise that banter becomes bickering and when people become hurt by comments of their colleagues. In such cases, managers should step in and have a quiet word with the parties involved.

They should inform both sides that while friendly interaction is encouraged, it is important to respectfully do this. It would be good if the manager has a few examples that occurred — inappropriate language or behaviour, for instance — and use these if necessary to ensure all parties understand what is acceptable and what not.

It is so much easier to do this at the beginning, when you first notice these signs of conflict and prevent the situation from escalating.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT HEAD ON

If you ignore a conflict at an early stage, it might escalate into something much harder to resolve. Some of the potential causes of conflict at work are obvious, and might include:

- Excessive personal use of email or Internet
- Poor attendance and time keeping
- Any form of bullying behaviour or harassment
- Any form of discriminatory behaviour
- Unacceptable language
- Theft

Some, are not so obvious but in the long-term may result in conflict:
- Taking credit for other people’s work or ideas
- Talking over people in meetings
- Not inviting team members to team social events
- Not covering for people when they are off sick
- Not taking messages for people
- Using someone else’s contacts or customer information without permission
- Not including people in group emails
- Ignoring people or being impolite

Managers should not ignore any such tensions either, and they should often hold one-on-one informal chats with team members to ensure that such issues are brought up naturally where possible. If they feel a problem is brewing, they should be proactive to initiate an informal discussion, and take action before it grows.

REMOVING EMPOYEES FROM CONFLICT SITUATIONS

If a conflict does blow up, managers need to be prepared to remove the people that are in conflict from the situation. By removing and separating them it protects them by giving them time to calm down and prevents them from saying things that may lead to an even bigger conflict. Once they are calm, the manager should have a rational conversation with them and start considering possible ways of resolving the issue.

REMOVING A DISRUPTIVE TEAM MEMBER

In some occasions, the problem may arise from a disruptive personality in the team that seems to clash with all others. In such cases, the manager should consider whether it’s possible to remove that individual to a different role or team that may be more suited for him/her.

Any such change though should be discussed with the individual, as well as the team he/she would potentially be joining. It’s quite common to have an employee placed elsewhere, only to find out the new team dynamics are working against him/her, due to their knowledge of the reasons for his/her move.

If nothing seems to work, the manager may have to resort to disciplinary process to ensure the individual understands the gravity of the issue. A disciplinary meeting will allow the manager and human resources (HR) to sit with the individual and clearly explain the standards of behaviour and performance expected.

Recognising the point at which informal approaches to resolving a conflict have failed and when formal disciplinary action must be taken is a judgement the line manager needs to make. HR can also be consulted on this.

FOLOWING UP ON CONFLICTS AFTER RESOLUTION

When old conflicts reoccur, there is no slow brewing, as emotions are still there and most likely still heated. It is, therefore, important for managers to ensure they follow up on conflicts through informal chats to ensure that the situation is resolved or remains under control.

COMMUNICATING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES TO EACH EMPLOYEE

It is important that everyone knows and understands the formal company procedures in place for conflict resolution/discipline. And it is once again the role of the manager to ensure that the whole team is aware of these, as well as that efforts should be made to resolve situations informally first before resorting to the formal procedures.

A culture of open communication on problems the team is having with their job, colleagues or outside of work should be established and encouraged, so issues are resolved in the most natural, organic way as much as possible.

USE ALL AVAILABLE RESOURCES TO INVESTIGATE INCIDENTS

Serious incidents of conflict such as alleged harassment, bullying, verbal abuse or physical intimidation need to be taken seriously. Such allegations must be properly investigated and dealt with as soon as possible, using the formal disciplinary procedures that the company offers.

The results of any such investigation must be accepted by all managers and team members alike. Formal disciplinary procedure is necessary for such serious allegations, as the matter needs to be investigated fairly and decisions cannot be made in the heat of the moment.

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Collina was named FIFA’s ‘Best Referee of the Year’ for six consecutive years.

He is best known for refereeing the 1999 UEFA Champions League Final between Bayern Munich and Manchester United.

That match was deemed the most exciting final in the UEFA Champions League history, simply because of the final two goals that were scored during the stoppage time by Manchester United, which made them winners.

He is none other than Pierluigi Collina, famous Italian former football referee who was named FIFA’s ‘Best Referee of the Year’ for six consecutive years. Celebrated as the best referee during his time, Collina was reputed for his sense of fairness despite great pressure and his calm demeanour. He was well-respected by the players, managers and fans.

The memorable, big final football matches that he has refereed include the World Cup 2002, Germany v Brasil, Champions League 2009, Manchester United v Bayern Munich and the Olympics 1996, Argentina v Nigeria.

The former referee who was also a financial consultant is now a renowned speaker and talks about the corporate world about leadership, decision-making and ways to succeed in life.

“Like for every Italian, football is something like a ‘religion’. When I was a child I spent hours playing football with my friends, I still remember these never-ending matches played in the park with the posts created using two stones or our sweaters,” Collina says when asked about how his passion for football sparked.

“Then I entered in a football academy and played as a sweeper until I was 17 years old. To be honest, when I was a younger, football had only 50% of my ‘heart’ as I had a big passion also for basketball. I was born in Bologna where this game is very popular.”

At 17, Collina’s schoolmate suggested that he participate in a referee course which was arranged by the local referees’ society.

“When you are 17 you do things without a specific reason, only to live a different experience. I accepted but I never thought to do it seriously. But things went very differently. Thirty years later I refereed my first Serie A match and I continued as active referee until 2005.”

For a long part of his career, he also worked on the side as a financial consultant.

Collina states that being considered the best referee in football comes with a huge responsibility. Nobody can accept that you can make a mistake, so you have to always maintain the highest of standards. You have to work very much harder to uphold the expectations thrust upon you.

“Modern football needs referees who are perfectly prepared. There was a time when knowing the rules and being fit was enough. Today something else is needed. Referees must know everything about the matches they are going to officiate and be able to predict what can happen.”

“In other words, they have to be able to read the game properly. UEFA is paying more and more attention to these details and trying to educate a new generation of modern referees.”

When it comes to handling famous football players, Collina says that they are treated the same as the others. Famous or unknown, each player has his own traits and Collina sometimes has to double up as a psychologist to understand if a smile works better than any word when it comes to motivating them.

“There are three things a good leader needs: clear vision, good communication skills and a sharp decision-making ability.”

Pierluigi Collina will be in Kuala Lumpur on April 2. He will be speaking at The Business of Innovation forum organised by The London Speaker Bureau. For more information, visit www.bizofinnovation.com.my or call 03-23010988.
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DEALING WITH ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICT

The forming stage in a saga of untruth where team members are uncertain about roles, and expectations.

Once they begin familiarising with one another, they enter the storming phase where they are more open and honest to the point of getting their issues on the table.

This storming phase is a time of anxiety, where the team needs to engage in a healthy way amidst strife in order for them to be more open and honest towards each other.

Each of these, if not addressed promptly and delicately, can eventually lead to an organisational breakdown.

The forming stage is critical in ultimately creating a team that is open and humble to view the conflict more positively.

The storming stage is a stage of uncertainty where each person has a piece of A4 paper and they are told to write down their different personalities and the characteristics that they possess. I once did an exercise where each person had a piece of A4 paper and tear it in a certain way. It may be appropriate for scenarios where you are not seeking to cooperate with the other party, but you have to deal with them in order to move forward.

This is to show that words will trigger emotions, both positive and negative. All it takes is one harsh word in a conflict scenario.

Leaders need to have self-awareness and adjust or own their own patterns. They can evaluate whether they are working for them or can explore alternatives.

Leaders also need to recognise that there is no one best style in managing conflicts as it is dependent on the context of the conflict.

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LEADERS ARE MADE

GEORGE KOHLRIESER ON BUILDING MALAYSIAN TALENTS

By CINDY YAP
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B eing at the forefront of a hostage crisis is a familiar predicament for George Kohlrieser. Having garnered 40 years of experience as a hostage negotiator, the organisational and clinical psychologist and consultant to global organisations worldwide, is an authority on negotiation and leadership, and is acclaimed for introducing the hostage metaphor to leadership development.

Now a professor of leadership and organisational behaviour at IMD (International Institute for Management Development) in Lausanne, Switzerland where he directs leadership programmes, Kohlrieser has two international bestselling books to his credit - Hostage at the Table which won Best Business Book of the Year in 2007 and Care to Dare which was published in 2012. Sharing with The LeadershipShow his perspectives on leadership and talent management, Kohlrieser says there is great leadership development going on in Malaysia.

"Malaysia's strength is the ability of leaders to create relationships and display mutual respect in the tapestry of the diverse culture, which is a big asset," he says.

On the other hand, Kohlrieser notes that there is a need to adapt to authority. "There is a pressing need for more assertiveness in Malaysia. Social bonding is very strong and it is more pertinent here than in other Asian countries."

"The ability to deal with conflicts in a more direct manner is essential in order to be a vibrant high performing team," he stresses.

TALENT MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT - THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

According to Kohlrieser, talent management is a fundamental success process in all organisations and crosses a broad spectrum. "It does not necessarily mean leadership in a direct way, but more of a process of developing these fundamental competencies and taking talents to a higher level," he enthuses.

"Prior to pursuing organisational effectiveness, attention must be paid to talent development," he continues.

Leadership development focuses on how leaders learn to manage themselves and to influence others, which involves emotional and social intelligence.

"Truly effective leadership is the ability to create that vision and then inspire people to come along with you, endure the pain and even sacrifice to achieve a greater benefit," says Kohlrieser.

With the many talent management initiatives and methodologies sprouting, such as six sigma, lean and kaizen, Kohlrieser doesn't think it is a passing fad and is certain that it is absolutely sustainable.

"The good news is, talent is something we primarily learn and develop. Of course, genetics plays a part, but leaders are not born; they are made," he says.

"Therefore, decide the skills that you want to develop and focus, focus, focus. You cannot be an expert in everything, so leverage on your strength and select the area you want to be an expert in," he advises.

Building Trust Through Dialogue

In his book, Hostage at the Table, Kohlrieser talks about his first experience of being held hostage in an Ohio hospital in 1969, with scissors held at his throat by a man who had earlier taken a nurse. Being invited to enter the room by the lieutenant, Kohlrieser engaged in a process with the hostage-taker, who later freed the blood-soaked uniformed nurse, and who took Kohlrieser instead.

"I learnt the power of bonding and looking at the eyes of the man who wanted to kill me and talk him out of it." he says. "Analogously, many people are psychological hostages and feel like a hostage even without a gun pointed to their head."

"The secret of good leadership is the ability to look beyond one's emotions. Good leaders offer a secure base to bear the pain and move towards higher performing behaviour."

"It is easy to identify somebody as an enemy, Kohlrieser adds, but a skilled leader will identify the common goal, create a dialogue, build a relationship and transform the enemy around that goal into becoming partners towards a common area, hence transforming an enemy into an ally."

That, according to Kohlrieser, is the secret of transforming.

Family Business Dynamics

With most business organisations in the world being family rooted, Kohlrieser opines that there is a need to learn how to separate family dynamics from business dynamics.

"Family businesses have a deeper bond, but any dysfunction between the father and the children, or the systems privately will have a spillover effect. A big problem is the willingness to give in, instead of fighting something through in a constructive and positive way."

Most second generation members under-perform, as they live under the shadow of the earlier generation. Authoritarianism over-dominates the family system, impeding the capacity of the children to blossom and develop as a leader.

If parents are constantly making concessions and not training the children to assert themselves, they can't express, influence and win. Confidence to assert themselves will never be developed," he claims.

"Children are natural negotiators and naturally assertive, but these fundamentals have to be developed and encouraged.

Kohlrieser's goal is to help family businesses become sustainable enterprises, focusing on developing the leadership skills and talent required, how to resolve conflicts and how not to be a hostage in too much harmony.

"I recommend that ideally the younger generation should work in a business outside the family business for a short time to pick up and develop a different set of skills, acumen and experience before returning to the family business. "Priority should be on long term goals and not on resolving an immediate need."

PARTING WORDS OF WISDOM

To HR leaders

- Listen to what people want to learn, encourage and don't let them get passive.
- Don't take a paternalistic/maternalistic attitude. Get into a partnership with them.
- Give people opportunities and let them fail without punishment.

To business leaders or CEOs in Asia

- Create opportunities.
- Put people in challenging situations.
- Put the finish on the table and engage in conflict management process.
- Give true, immediate feedback on how to improve in order to be effective and a high performing organisation.

To people starting out a career

- Approach trustworthy people and listen to their lessons learnt.
- Take risks and do not be afraid of failure. When you fail and feel horrible, you build resilience and will bounce back stronger. When you play the wind, look for opportunities and use every opportunity found.

George Kohlrieser is frequently in Malaysia. To engage him, email people@leaderonomics.com. To view his full interview, visit www.leaderonomics.tv

"There is a pressing need for more assertiveness in Malaysia. Social bonding is very strong and it is more pertinent here than in other Asian countries," says Kohlrieser.
OPEN DIALOGUES

HOW TO TALK TO ALMOST ANYONE ABOUT ALMOST ANYTHING

At the heart of every successful conversation is the free flow of relevant information. During risky, controversial, and emotional conversations, people who are skilled are able to talk through difficult situations and what we do to prepare for them.

The pool of shared meaning is the birthplace of synergy. The reverse is sadly true. When people are not involved and are sitting back quietly during crucial and touchy conversations, they are rarely committed to the final decision.

The first principle of dialogue is to start with the heart – your own heart. You will have a tough time getting the dialogue right if you cannot get your own heart right. In short, work on “me” first, “us” comes second.

That’s the best way to start work on “us” – start with “me”. We must realize that as much as others may need to change, or we may want them to change, the only person we can causally change and inspire is undoubtedly the person we see every day in the mirror.

So, how do skilled people “start with the heart” two ways?

1. They focus on what they want. 2. They refuse the “fool’s choice”.

While others would opt for justifying their unhealthy behaviour, claiming that they had no choice except to either fight or take flight, the dialogue-smart group of people always believes that dialogue is still the best option.

A person keen on pursuing a dialogue will always keep in focus the question “What do I really want here?”

Constantly asking this question is important because it helps you focus on what is your real motivation and what you want to see achieved through this crucial conversation.

Ask yourself this powerful question when you feel the stakes running high – it helps to redirect our hearts and focus our brains.

When you need to reframe and move back to your original motives and intentions, you often need to intentionally take a step back and look at yourself.

Some questions that you can ask yourself when you step out of the conversation for a moment are:

- What do I really want for myself?
- What do I really want for others?
- What do I really want for the relationship?

When you have established those answers, then ask yourself the final question: How would I behave if I really wanted these results?

Another thing you need to do is remember to find your bearings – when you ask these questions and take a conscious step back, you relocate your North Star.

A crucial conversation turns into a crucial conversation when opinions vary, stakes are high, and emotions start to get into play and run strong. Crucial conversations are day-to-day conversations that affect our lives. They are not only conversations that happen around a conference table amongst the high ranks of presidents, emperors, and prime ministers.

Interestingly, for us, as conversations get more and more crucial, our ability to handle and manage them is sorely lacking. It is an irony that when something matters most, we do our worst.

Crucial conversations are usually spontaneous and personal. They are often tinged with anger,旬 and act in self-defeating ways.

The impact of not being able to handle a crucial conversation well is high and it can affect every aspect of our lives – our careers, communities, relationships and even our personal health. It can impact the overall quality of our lives.

Generally, we can do one of these three things when we come face-to-face with a crucial conversation:

1. We can avoid it. We can face it and handle it poorly, or 3) We can face it and handle it well.

Hence, the writing of this book – to give us a handle and some tools for talking when the stakes and emotions run high.

So, let’s explore how we can step up to crucial conversations and handle them well.

MASTERCING CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

Martin Luther King Jr. says, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

The authors of this book studied Kevin, one of eight vice-presidents in a particular company who had been identified as exceedingly influential.

For example, when the vice-president was away on leave, the rest of the company would slow down and struggle to get things done.

The authors of this book, finding this out, engaged Kevin in a crucial conversation, and after the conversation, the company was back on track.

Here’s an example:

Kevin’s boss asked him to look after a particular project for three months while he was away,

Kevin agreed to do the task, and during the three months, his boss would give him one meeting every week to discuss the project.

The meetings were touchy, and there was a lot of friction between Kevin and his boss.

Kevin was frustrated by the meetings, and his boss was frustrated by Kevin’s inaction.

The authors of this book engaged Kevin and his boss in a crucial conversation, and after the conversation, both were satisfied.

When people intentionally avoid holding meaningful conversations with each other, it is not surprising that individually smart people can make collectively stupid decisions.

The whole idea is to encourage people to contribute all their ideas, opinions and thoughts into the pool of shared meaning. When this happens, it increases a group’s ability to make better decisions.

On top of that, since the pool is shared, people willingly embrace and act on the decisions they make.

In other words, the authors put it well when they say, “The Pool of Shared Meaning is the birthplace of synergy.”

The reverse is sadly true. When people are not involved and are sitting back quietly during crucial and touchy conversations, they are rarely committed to the final decision.

As Samuel Butler puts it, “He that complies against his will has his own opinion sworn against his will.”

Sometimes, people retreat into silence. They play Salute and Stay Mute. They rather not confront those in authority. Information and meaning is withheld from the pool.

We adopt the silent treatment.

The good news is that dialogue skills are learnable. We will now explore various tools that we can use to help create the right conditions for dialogue to take place.

The focus is on how we think about problem situations and what we need to prepare for them.

NO.1 START WITH THE HEART

“Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret” – Ambrose Bierce

The first principle of dialogue is to start with the heart – your own heart. You will have a tough time getting the dialogue right if you cannot get your own heart right. In short, work on “me” first, “us” comes second.

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By VINESH Naidu
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SUBSTITUTE THE UN WITH HUMANS/EMPLOYEES. PEOPLE JUST WANT TO HAVE THEIR VOICES HEARD, FOR WHAT ARE WE WITHOUT OUR THOUGHTS?

“THE ULTIMATE MEASURE OF A MAN IS NOT WHERE HE STANDS IN MOMENTS OF COMFORT, BUT WHERE HE STANDS AT TIMES OF CHALLENGE AND CONTROVERSY.”
— M A R T I N L U T H E R K I N G J R.

RESPONDING RATHER THAN REACTING

Or put another way, communicate, not escalate the issue at hand. Unfortunately, you can be forgiven for thinking that doing this is harder than stumbling on to Colonel Sanders’ 11 secret herbs and spices. It takes a lot of practice to separate the heart and the mind from the issue at hand. But try we must.

Hilary Clinton, the secretary of state of the United States says “’Smart power’ is the use of American power in ways that would help prevent and resolve conflict – not just send our military in.”

ISOlATING THE PROBLEM

In instances of conflict, leaders need to act in good faith. Trust that everyone is there for a common cause, yet somehow, it has been obscured by the tensions that have arisen due to whatever reason. US politician and UN Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson once said “The whole basis of the United Nations is the right of all nations - great or small - to have weight, to have a vote, to be attended to, to be a part of the twentieth century.” You know, that’s essentially it.

Substitute the UN with humans/employees. People just want to have their voices heard, for what are we without our thoughts?

Providing a platform to air views should be on top of every leader’s list of conflict resolution. This would ensure the issue is isolated from the surrounding factors that can then be dealt with more efficiently.

STABILISING

In UN peace operations, the stabilisation phase is the period that follows immediately after the official end of hostilities.

The phase serves to establish a safe and secure environment followed by managing the immediate consequences of the conflict through emergency humanitarian assistance programmes.

In a work environment, once the tensions are stabilised, the leader has to take responsibility for providing a non-threatening environment for the conflicting parties to sort out the differences.

One way to have to deal with never ending hostilities, face a spreading dark cloud of anger, and these festering wounds will lead to bigger issues like absenteeism, higher turnovers, and in the worst cases, physically aggressive behaviour.

“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing.”
— Theodore Roosevelt.

So go ahead leaders, deal with conflict, but aim to resolve, not avoid!

RESOLVE, DON’T AVOID

LESSONS FROM THE UNITED NATIONS

TWO different worlds. Two wildly different scenarios. Two very different consequences – One concerns the loss of lives and livelihoods and a generation of scars left behind; the other is the loss of a happy, mutually beneficial working environment that will foster a sense of mistrust in the long term and by consequence, loss of productivity for the company.

Death, taxes and conflict make up what I would call the un-holy Trinity, the only constant in life. We can’t run away from any of it, and the approach that people take in dealing with it is where the problem stems from. It’s unfortunate that many leaders tend to strive for conflict avoidance as opposed to conflict resolution.

When does conflict happen? Simply stated, when people are put together for whatever reason. You are either working next to each other, or working on a shared project or working on pursuing the same limited resource to further your own ends. Even if you hole yourself up in the middle of a dark cave high up in the mountains and meditate, some of the inner battles will play on in the mind.

As in all matters, first things first. When dealing with conflict situations, the agencies concerned are first tasked with doing an in-depth analysis.

This consists of assessing key conflict factors (sources of tension and root causes of conflict, including linkages and synergies); actors (interests, potential spoilers, capacities for violence and peace, incentives required to promote peace); and dynamics (triggers for violence, local capacities for peaceful and constructive conflict management, likely future scenarios).

Drawing from these outlines, a typical conflict situation in an office setting would consist of:

- **Key conflict factors:** projects behind schedule, missed meetings, a stolen stapler or maybe even an unwashed coffee mug!
- **Actors:** fellow colleagues, direct reports, and more frequently than not, the boss!
- **Dynamics:** existing office culture, future outlook of the business and industries the and the sort of pressure the team is under to perform.

Now, once these preliminary but crucial findings are outlined, the necessary steps can be taken to deal with the conflict. The United Nations, with all its years of experience has fully subscribed to the age-old wisdom of prevention being better than a cure. Thus the first steps that are suggested is to look out for potential conflicts.

**PREVENTION**

We all know that the best ideas come out of chaos. It’s a commonly accepted wisdom that the quietest teams don’t always provide the most innovative ideas that change the world. But what does need to be prevented is non-constructive conflict.

Leadership is when you build an environment that allows for conflict of ideas. It’s these ideas that can be channelled into making things better. If you are a leader and your first response to the word “conflict” is to jump behind the desk and tell the secretary to say “not in”, then you are in a major headache.

In response to these factors, leaders can seek to use in their everyday leadership.

There are invaluable lessons though, that can be channelled into strategies required to promote peace), and incentives to promote peace).

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COMPETING EFFECTIVELY

By RAINA RADZAIF
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THOMAS-Kilmann classifies five conflict-handling styles premised on two primary concerns - our selves and others involved in the conflict. The five styles are:

- Competing (high concern for self, low concern for others)
- Collaborating (high concern for self and others)
- Accommodating (low concern for self, high concern for others)
- Avoiding (low concern for self and others)
- Compromising (moderate concern for self and others)

In this article, let’s focus on the first of these styles - competing. A competing individual is described as power-driven, high in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness, showing for example through the use of the person’s authority, position, wealth, or influence.

There is not much regard for feelings, views or goals of others, nor is there interest in collaboration or compromise.

The idea is to win or succeed in achieving one’s desired outcome when placed against another person who desires a different outcome. It puts parties in a win/lose relationship as one attempts to achieve his/her goals at the expense of others.

EARLY IMPRESSIONS

The idea of competing as a means to achieve power and control comes from early childhood and is bolstered throughout out school and college. As children mature they discover that they can get material objects and social control over people by applying an assertive, demanding or aggressive behaviour.

Although parents and teachers tell children to be kind, considerate and cooperative, there remains a tendency to incline towards resorting to competitiveness as a means of solving problems and gaining acceptance and success.

They compete to “be the best” student, athlete, musician or to be popular and accepted among peers. Some learn to deal with disagreements by persuading others to accept their position. Others use power negatively by way of arguments, intimidation, threats or physical fighting.

Those who are effective at competing are viewed as successful. Those who do not stand up for themselves are viewed as weak. We can even see it in video games that promote the thrill of engaging in conflict with the goal of defeating the “enemy”, often using any means possible. These dynamics promote competitiveness.

JOINING THE WORKFORCE

The idea of competing to solve differences and achieve goals continues into adulthood and employment. People compete for status, position and recognition at their workplace, a behaviour that is exacerbated and encouraged by being rewarded for their ability to achieve goals by performing better than their colleagues for instance.

While competing can be productive, it can also cause problems when used excessively or inappropriately. Examples include misuse of power and unethical or illegal activities as we see so often in the news. Very few successful people eventually develop the judgment and skills to use competitiveness effectively and appropriately.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT BY COMPETING

Competing is the proper form of dealing with conflict when used in the following situations:

- When being right is more important than preserving the relationship with the other party.
- When important but unpopular actions are needed such as cost-cutting, enforcing rules, or administrating discipline.
- When you know you are right and are doing the right thing.
- When one’s position, authority, or rights are being challenged.
- When implementing strategic change and strong, confident leadership needs to be demonstrated.

When used improperly, competing in conflict situations may result in negative consequences:

- It strains relationships leading to resentment and retaliation.
- It causes intimidation that inhibits communication, discussion of alternative ideas and attempts at problem-solving.
- Personal drive for power and control overrules the best interests of the organisation.
- It results in reduced commitment and support from staff.
- “Winning at all costs” harms others.

Studies applying the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator have shown that individuals who are consistently competitive tend to be males who are extraverted-sensing-thinking-judging (ESTJ) or extroverted-intuitive-thinking-judging (ENTJ).

Similar type ESTJ and ENTI females are more likely to adopt a compromising approach to conflict. This could be due to the socialisation and traditional roles of females in our society. Competitive males are often viewed positively, regarded as “persuasive” or “powerful”, while competitive females may be viewed negatively as “demanding” or “aggressive”.

A person whose dominant conflict style is competing is inclined to see differences of others in dichotomies - skilled/unskilled, right/wrong, winner/loser, competent/incompetent, etc.

A Myers-Briggs study suggests that those who are competitive approach problems objectively and are not very concerned about the subjective impact of the outcome on the person who loses.

They are likely to prioritise on achieving their goals even if it negatively impacts their relationships. They are also likely to be decisive and do not want to waste time going through the alternatives.

If you find yourself to be competitive when facing a disagreement or conflict, you might want to:

1. Think thoroughly whether competing is the appropriate mode, weighing the pros and cons. Make an effort to listen and consider alternative suggestions.
2. Evaluate the possible impact of all options under consideration.
3. Be honest with yourself regarding any personal relationship problems that may be impacting your feelings and beliefs about the disagreement.
4. Understand that your desire to be competitive may have negative consequences on your relationship with the person you are disagreeing with.

DEALING WITH A COMPETITIVE “OTHER”

When addressing a conflict with another person who takes a competitive position against you, consider doing the following:

- Allow the person to first thoroughly explain their position and ask clarifying questions.
- Summarise and repeat what you have heard in a neutral manner.
- Acknowledge the parts that you agree with.
- Ask the party to carefully listen to your position, clarifying points of agreement and disagreement, using logic and data to support your perspective.
- Consider having both positions put into writing for review and consideration.
- Minimise discussion or expression of feelings or subjective elements unless the other party seems open to this perspective.
- Point out the mutual benefits of a decision that involve collaboration or compromise if this is an option.
- Assist that person to understand how your position will benefit him/her and how they can gain from agreement with your proposal.
- If required, calmly inform that person that you have power, influence, or ability to win a power contest and that person will be better off not to continue to compete over the outcome of the decision that needs to be made.

When working as a neutral third party it is helpful to get the parties to consider the points made above. It is possible that one party will be in a relative power position over another, such as a boss vs an employee or a provider vs a consumer.

In these situations the third party must be neutral, yet balance the power relationship so that each side effectively presents their case and hears that of the other.

By helping the conflicting parties to understand the issue, you may lead them towards conciliation. Clearly, the adoption of the competing style to manage conflicts and differences can have both positive and negative consequences.

Proper use of this style may produce positive outcomes while misuse of it can lead to new problems. Being mindful of this can help us to be more productive personally and professionally.

Raina Radzaif is a learning and development practitioner with a leading Malaysia-based multinational corporation.
We aspire to equip leaders with the competency to support regional and global businesses. This poses as a great challenge for HR as it involves human capital development. We spend endless efforts to discover the best approach to nurture our team members to deliver the best customer experience, to add value and to differentiate ourselves from our peers and competitors.

We not only build capable team members, but also “change champions” and “influential leaders” who are able to innovate and integrate thought process and make the complex simple for the benefit of the customers. It is part of our HR DNA to accelerate the development of our team members, emphasising on the aptitude to reach greater heights in an ever-changing environment of technological advancements, economic and political influences, and social needs and expectations.

As we move towards a borderless world, HR plays an integral part in building a fluid and adaptive team to create a winning culture. At Dell, HR collaborates with the various business leaders to plan and implement programmes and activities to foster leaders of tomorrow, who are energised to go beyond their own sphere.

I think keeping up with the pace of change is the biggest challenge for HR today. As we know, the business environment is changing so rapidly. On top of that, with the convergence of new technologies, the dynamics of workforce such as multiple generations in organisations and the fact that people are more mobile, contribute to businesses becoming more complex.

Change is never an easy thing. For HR to keep up and stay relevant to the business, we need to adapt and be agile within changes. By doing this, businesses will continue to look to HR to partner with them to strategically chart the business directions.

What can we do to keep up? For a start HR needs to constantly keep abreast of what’s happening in today’s business environment. We need to understand the current business issues and what they mean for the future.

Another way is to engage with all stakeholders in bringing the understanding of the changes and leverage on them in preparing the people to adapt to the coming changes.

Finally, it would be an added advantage if HR practitioners continue to up-skill themselves by going through certification programmes, as many of these certified bodies are very closely aligned to the current business needs.

I would assume for every exceptional talent out there in the market, there are probably three or four HR recruiters eyeing the same person just in that country itself, not forgetting the global boundless platform we operate in today.

**Talent:**
- The war for talent is far from over and I believe it still remains the biggest challenge for HR. The painful reality of an employee-driven market is becoming more real everyday. Despite unemployment rates rising everywhere, HR faces the challenge to find “real talent”.
- Due to cost cutting measures, rationalisation initiatives, technology advances and automation, the standard for “talent” has been raised so much that “average” just doesn’t cut it.
- Every HR recruiter is looking for the best. There is only one headcount and they need to fill it with the candidate with the right skills, right knowledge, right attitude, tech savviness and leadership capability.
- I would assume for every exceptional talent out there in the market, there are probably three or four HR recruiters eyeing the same person just in that country itself, not forgetting the global boundless platform we operate in today.

**Technology:**
- Coupled with the raised expectations of talent, the talent pool is also shrinking. With the advancement of the internet, anyone can be an entrepreneur with minimal startup capital and risks.
- This advancement has seen many talented professionals and fresh graduates leaving the employment market.
- Social media has also opened up doors for passive job seekers to be sought out, making retention the other challenge for HR leaders.
- Embracing technology as a good buddy would be every HR professional’s challenge. We are expected to hire the best talents at more cost effective methods.
- This is where HR professionals need to upskill and truly invest in technology for better processes, for better data analytics and better research and truly invest in technology for better processes.
- Social media expert is a skill that has fast become a requirement for HR professionals.

**Thinking out of the box:**
- Just as we expect to hire the best of talents and average doesn’t cut it anymore, the same expectations are placed on HR (especially from the millennial generation today).
- HR needs to be “unique” and “innovative” in its strategies to recruit, to develop and to engage its people at every level (and yet remain compliant to all the necessary legalities).
- We can learn a lot from organisations who have really taken their people strategies to the next level.
- Organisations like Netflix, Infosys, Syntel, Hong Kong Broadband Network, Tata, Google and Zappos have taken HR to the next level and it’s refreshing to see what risks they took and how these paid off.

The onus of being the Employer of Choice sits on the shoulders of all HR leaders, and this is not just a title of an award. It has to be REAL. With the rise of blogging and social media, no longer can any organisation hide under an Employer of Choice award.

**Final thoughts:**
And the biggest dilemma for HR professionals? It’s our potentially self-fulfilling prophecies. We will be the ones to create the talent-driven market of the future with every move we make today. And then the cycle of challenges continues.