

# CONFLICT



Conflict can actually serve useful purposes. At issue is how to attain worthwhile ends from the difference that inevitably arise in the pursuit of any collective activity.

Conflict is to decision-making as friction is to walking. So often, business people regard conflict the same way engineers are thought to regard friction - as something to be avoided or eliminated. Just as friction generates heat, drains power from motors, and causes wear and tear, so people think conflict paralyzes decision-makers, wastes time, and produces blizzards of "CYA" emails.

Perhaps, however, it is the way we think about conflict that causes us to conclude that it no usefulness. Stop for a moment! Can you imagine friction being a positive force?

When I was a boy, my father took me to "Space Camp" in Huntsville, Alabama, where the value of friction was vividly demonstrated. We campers strapped on astronaut shoes and went into the Space Lab where we were asked to walk across a floor perforated by tiny holes with air streaming up through them. This floor was designed to simulate walking in a low-gravity environment where the coefficient of friction was very, very low. Try as we could, it was simply impossible to walk across that floor - unless we cheated by pushing off a wall and gliding across.

Often we think of friction as being a drag, slowing down progress or causing waste. But we campers saw that it actually serves a vital purpose, helping us achieve locomotion. Certainly, you can think of countless useful applications of friction right in your own home (ever wonder how those dishes get clean?).

Just as friction is a characteristic of the natural world that can serve useful purposes, so conflict is a principle that can make positive contributions to the affairs of mankind. At issue is the question of how to attain worthwhile ends from the differences that arise in the pursuit of any collective activity.

My son's sixth grade class is studying the Middle East, a region where conflict has been the defining characteristic for at least 3,000 years. Their teacher asked them for an original definition of conflict. They concluded that it is an inescapable part of "human nature" involving "a misunderstanding or disagreement that causes a problem or struggle to achieve goals between people, groups, or nations."

To me that is a pretty fair description of what goes on inside organizations as people disagree over the ends they want to pursue or over the means to achieve ends upon which they actually agree. But I would say that the schoolchildren's most profound insight is that conflict is a fundamental part of being human. We all create our unique reality from the ceaseless flow of our own original thought. No two people think exactly the same way any more than two snowflakes have the same structure. Is it any wonder, then, that people in every group see the world differently?

Once I began to see this obvious fact, I was astonished at how amazingly diverse thought is. One day we were holding a meeting that was marked by a great deal of strife as we argued over setting budget priorities for the coming year. Our firm used to do this collectively, with everyone having a voice in the outcome; so you can imagine the wide divergence of opinion. Which took priority, someone's pet project or a larger bonus?

At the end of the session, one of the partners asked each person to describe how he or she was feeling. The range of responses - from angry, puzzled, or betrayed to cheerful, relieved, or peaceful - dumbfounded me. Were these people actually in the same company, much less the same room?

What I was seeing was thinking in action as each of us created his or her own reality from our common fabric of thought. No wonder conflict is part of being human! Assuming then that conflict is an inescapable manifestation of being human, perhaps the most relevant question is not how to eliminate it, but rather how to put it to work for us so that, like friction, it serves a valuable purpose.

If conflict is going to accomplish something constructive, then it seems to me that the central question has to do with how we resolve conflict within our organizations. Is there a way to settle differences that helps, rather than hinders, achievement?

Well, my son's sixth grade class had something to say about this very question. They envisioned two ways to settle difficulties - the first being our old democratic friend, majority rule, and the second being collaboration, a most unusual form of conflict resolution.

Both are actually a step up from what happens at many institutions where someone, usually a senior executive, resolves conflict by fiat. Certainly you know the drill - the troops fight until he or she intervenes and tells people the way it will be. This leads to all kinds of problems, the primary one being that the "losers" often do not go away but "live to fight another day" by covertly resisting implementation. So the harder the leader pushes, the more resistance he or she faces and the more underground the conflict burrows. Where this is the cultural norm, people are usually very unhappy and frustrated - including the leaders.

In their wisdom the sixth graders never even considered decision by fiat as an option. While "majority rule" (some would term this a form of "cooperation") has a powerful appeal to those used to working in dictatorial organizations, in fact it has its own flaws. It shares the same built-in resistance that marks autocratic institutions - namely, that conflicts tend to keep resurfacing as the minority seeks to recover what they lost in the voting process.

In the United States we call this "Beltway Gridlock." And it can generate such endless rules and procedures, all in the name of ensuring "fairness," that people are turned off by the prospect of putting so much effort into resolving even the simplest questions. It is all too easy for majority rule to result in bureaucratic procedures that smother innovation. And it can be carried to absurd extremes - in one company there was letterhead permanently engraved with the words, "circulating for non-objection."

More importantly, because they generally involve disagreements about things that already exist inside people's minds, majority-rule models rarely yield fresh thinking. In the world of "You have your opinions and facts, and I have my data and beliefs" very

little changes for there is no opening for reflective thought or insight. I saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker* that was right on target. A man and woman are watching an opinion TV program with the caption, "Look, honey! Important people talking loudly." Again, the sixth graders could see this clearly when they concluded that the result of majority rule could be "good or bad, depending on your point of view."

But their second way - collaboration -- contains the germ of genius. These kids see that conflict "can force you to think of different ways to reach your goals or of different goals altogether." In other words, they understand that conflicts arise only because our thinking looks "real" to each one of us and that going beyond our initial "certainty" requires only a willingness to examine what we don't know rather than what we think we already know.

This truth lies at the heart of collaborative or integrative conflict resolution.

Everyone's desires either find a place, or the desires themselves change as people work together to create something fresh and original.

Take two people sitting in a library. One person wants to open the window to let in fresh air; the other wants to keep the window shut to reduce street noise. It looks like an intractable situation - at least until they discover that by opening the window in an adjacent room each of their objectives can be fulfilled.

This kind of group process is actually the "art of collaborative thinking." At its core are the principles that we have talked about many times: thinking thoughts about others that are loving and positive so that optimistic feelings, rapport, and trust are present (the handmaidens of productivity); ignoring what you already think so that you may truly "hear" what others are saying; waiting patiently for those spanking new insights that cause unity to precipitate itself; and having the faith to put aside your ego (your investment in the outcome) in service to something larger than yourself.

For leaders then, the key question is not, "What are our conflicts?" (every institution will have them since this is an inherent part of human nature) but rather, "How do we go about resolving them?"

If these sixth graders can answer this question with such perception and wisdom, think of what you may be able to achieve if you can simply see things with the same innocent clarity.

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