

# Leadership & Conflict

One Managing Director I worked with relished opportunities to mischievously create a little tension amongst the senior team. Given the real life challenges faced by the team, he didn't need to look for ways to create conflict. Given the pace and pressure of business, tensions and conflict often arise naturally on teams without any prompting. What this Manager understood, however, was that the energy created around unearthing latent conflict can be harnessed in a positive way, presenting an opportunity to discuss matters where team members had valid concerns which were difficult to openly discuss. Conflict, managed constructively, helps teams storm through to performance, it helps define and manage relationship boundaries, it tests relationships, it unleashes alternative ideas and creativity, it helps set and renew groundrules and operating principles, it ensures all sides are heard. That's the potential



## **Step One: Resolve any 'inner conflict'**

Often the best place to start is with the Leaders' own position in relation to dealing with conflict – to explore any 'inner conflict' muddying the issue. Key questions include: What's your style in dealing with conflict i.e. how does it make you personally feel? Do you see it as a threat or an opportunity? What has been your approach in the past – avoidance at any cost or head-on clash? Do you see conflict in a co-operative, or a competitive light? What culture around conflict have you helped create that may need to change? When this first step is navigated successfully, leaders are better equipped to manage opposing views.

## **Step Two: Understand that resolving conflict is a messy process**

Think back to any of the 'game-changing' moments in your leadership career. Most of the successfully resolved issues or transitions involve that precarious journey from an 'I might not make it' position through to 'where do I start?' I'm reminded of Rhonke's 'growth circles' which refer to a sense of 'stretch' or disequilibrium – a creative tension which lies between panic and comfort. Resolving conflict often forces us, 'to learn on the edge'. This process can present an emotional, social and practical roller-coaster. That's normal - stay with it. Nothing worthwhile is ever easily achieved.

## **Step Three: Make it 'ok' to raise issues of conflict**

In some team environments, it's not cool to 'rock the boat'. Those who care enough to raise real issues are often labelled 'resistors'. Some members fear that questions will be raised as to how much of a 'team player' they really are! Lencioni, on the other hand encourages leaders to 'mine for conflict'. This comes with a responsibility however, to ensure that you create a safe and controlled space to manage any issues that are raised. Sometimes its like the rules in surgery: 'Never open up anything that you cannot close! If peers or team members take up your offer to discuss issues, they'll never do it again unless you manage the process even-handedly. Listen to all inputs. No finger-pointing, no name-taking, no taking sides. Understanding precedes solutions. Slow the clock down and listen!

#### **Step Four: Interests vs positions**

Under threat, individuals often adopt or represent a ‘position’. Taking a position helps us feel the ground is firmer underneath our feet. It’s understandably a defensive mode in the face of opposition. To move towards workable options – you need to dig a little deeper. Find what the real ‘interests and concerns’ are underlying the entrenched stance. It’s easier to acknowledge and address real interests and concerns rather than change someone’s position head on. And often people in conflict share common concerns – acknowledging shared concerns helps bridge the divide. What people are *disagreed* on, is easy to determine. The leaders job is to seek areas of overlap – where there is real *agreement* and to build on this.

#### **Step Five: Finish what you started**

Resolving conflict is not just about agreement on the substantive issues. There are often emotional and procedural factors which can derail a dialogue. At Tandem Consulting we don’t impose a one-size-fits-all model to managing conflict. But we do ask you to think about the best way to carefully plan and navigate a solution to a conflict on all three levels – 1. On the substantive issues, 2. On the emotional issues and on 3. On the procedure and process level.

We’ve seen leaders make matters worse by taking the wrong approach on an already contentious matter. Sometimes it’s not arguments/proposals that are found to be unacceptable, but ‘tone of voice’ or ‘who wasn’t asked for their opinion’ that really matters. I’ve touched the tip of the iceberg on this topic. Read the next article by Tandem’s John O’Dowd to explore how conflict manifests itself in the workplace and alternative ways to find workable solutions.

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