

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

It's Time to Change the Way We Talk About Conflict

Don't avoid it — Steer through it

There are some things in this world that are just inevitable. As much as we try to avoid those things that we can't get away from, what we are really doing is avoiding dealing with them, which doesn't work. This isn't like driving around a pothole in the road. It's more like driving with a flat tire because you don't want to face the cost of buying a new tire. Avoiding your problems will only lead to bigger and more destructive ones.

One of the many things in life we all try to avoid and fail at is conflict. In life there will always be moments where you disagree with others, that's just how it goes. Most of us really don't like engaging in conflict at all. So our natural tendency is to find a detour around it if we can, because that is how we were raised, taught or trained to react. Seeing conflict as negative and destructive is learned behaviour. What is truly destructive and negative is not conflict itself, but the unproductive ways we engage in and deal with it or avoid it. The truth is that we need to change our thinking. If we learn to see conflict as part of the process — an inevitable reaction to working, building and growing as a team, we can learn to see how conflict can be productive and constructive.

The first step to changing our thinking and seeing conflict differently is to understand how we all engage in conflict in different ways. Some people are very blunt and direct; others hold back and are wary of engaging forcefully with people. That's ok, the approach is valid. The behaviour is what we need to examine. That's where conflict becomes destructive. Often when people are frustrated, they resort to negative behaviours such as name-calling, gossip, backstabbing, belittling, caving-in to pressure and the list goes on.

With someone who has a more dominant personality, they may resort to being pushy and aggressive with their ideas. If the person on the other end has a more calm steady personality, he or she may very well just cave in and give the other person their way. Both reactions are counterproductive and in fact unproductive conflict because no one is going to get anywhere. The dominant person might get their way, but the whole team will likely not truly buy in and they end up moving forward on something that should not have been approved in the first place.

The second step is to actively work on changing those negative behaviours so your team can learn to engage in conflict around ideas, rather than attacking each other and getting nowhere. Digging into some self-reflection and taking time to learn about our own tendencies as well as others can really help hit the reset button on our negative thinking. Ultimately, if we can learn to see conflict differently, acknowledge our own negative behaviours and learn how to use conflict as a means of positive, productive engagement, the inevitability of conflict becomes something we no longer avoid, but steer through with intention, as a team.

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