

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2021 Edition

Ask the Expert

What will Organizational Leadership Post COVID need to look like?

Transform stressful situations into productive conflict

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased stress in our workplaces. This began through the initial disruption and had an immediate impact on our essential front-line workers and will continue as remote workers return to work and as we all manage a new normal. When stress increases, the opportunities for conflict multiply.

In any organization, stressful situations can intensify differences of opinions and magnify differing values that divide people. We look to our organizational leaders to successfully navigate issues in tough times, clarify values and unite people together to achieve innovative solutions.

Mark Gerzon, author of *'Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences into Opportunities'*, identifies eight tools that every organization needs to develop to take that journey through difficult situations and shift the unproductive conflict that can spiral in stressful situations into productive conflict. These tools will support organizational leadership to foster an environment where innovation can flourish.

1. Integral Vision

Before we charge ahead, let's take an opportunity to step back and look at the situation from a different perspective. What will it take to help others turn away from the 'you' against 'me' dynamic that can be fostered in conflict situations and stand together as 'us against the problem'?

2. Systems Thinking

This reflects an organizational model that recognizes that people, structures and processes interact within organizational systems to foster (or restrict) organizational (and individual) wellbeing. What stakeholders should we approach to understand the whole problem and identify the multiple elements creating the conflict situation and the relationship between these elements?

3. Presence

This is the ability to be fully in the moment, engaging all our resources and not just relying on our thinking brains, but our whole selves, emotionally, spiritually and physically. What are we noticing in the conversation? What are we feeling? What is behind what others are displaying in their behaviours? Awareness is a fundamental skill when managing conflict in ourselves and others.

4. Inquiry

Asking questions is the key. It's difficult to be curious when we are in the heart of conflict. How can we transform the conflict if we do not understand it? Asking the right questions helps others understand their role in the conflict. Can we dig down to the heart of the problem and keep asking and then what? What do you need to do to be open to really listening to what you hear?



Michelle Phaneuf
P.Eng., ACC
Partner, Workplace
Fairness West

Ask the Expert continued

5. Conscious Conversation

We all have a choice in how we speak and listen. Participants in difficult conversations are often reacting mindlessly in an ongoing loop of attacks and counterattacks. Organizations need to support others to have a different type of conversation, shifting away from positions to discussing values and interests.

Taking time to ensure we build understanding before focusing on solutions is important.

6. Dialogue

Building trust is the first step in resolving conflict and dialogue is the path to get there. Genuine dialogue occurs when participants move away from defensiveness and become open to really hearing the other side. It lays the foundation to discover new options and gives rise to innovation.

7. Bridging

Bridging is the process of building partnerships and alliances that cross the division in an organization. The bridge is constructed by trust, respect, empathy, understanding and collaboration. When the energy between the parties changes, the conflict can be transformed. This shift takes time to create and is generated by focusing conversations on values and interests to build understanding — not agreement. Let's focus on finding solutions to the issues that meet all parties' needs.

8. Innovation

Innovation is the breakthrough that creates new options for moving through conflicts. Those options will point to a new plan that requires the buy-in of all involved. If this does not occur, the plan will not be sustainable in the long term. We may need to go back to the drawing board to ensure we meet the needs of all participants.

Being an organizational leader when stress is high and conflict is elevated takes time and patience. It is an iterative process with ups and downs. It entails reaching into the past when required, staying in the present for open dialogue and focusing on the future once participants have shifted. Good leaders build the skills required to transform conflict and support those around them to get to the other side. We might not know yet what the 'other side' is after this pandemic, but trust that strong organizational leadership will generate the innovative outcomes needed to adapt and thrive.

Michelle Phaneuf is Partner at Workplace Fairness West and can be reached via email at phaneuf@workplacefairnesswest.ca.