Guidelines for Successfully Navigating Your Way Through Conflict

Surfacing issues, hearing different points of view, and working through conflict take time, energy, and diplomacy. It's no wonder that many people prefer to ignore conflict and push through to a speedy conclusion. After all, who has time for all of that debating?

Those who dismiss conflict and ignore the implications do so at their own peril. By brushing conflict aside, or minimizing the consequences, achieving your desired results will take far longer—if in fact you can achieve them at all.

Here are some tips to help you anticipate, surface, and work through differences of opinion by having productive conversations, whether face to face, remote or a combination.

1. Identify likely areas of conflict that may impede progress in advance

    Don't be caught blindsided, imagining that everyone will naturally agree to go along with "what's best for business." After all, what's best for business can be highly subjective. And what's good for the business overall may not be so great for certain individuals or organizations. Ask yourself:

    o   Whose interests might be competing?
    o   What organizations may perceive they have the most to gain or lose?
    o   Who might be feeling alienated?
    o   Who's likely to resist change?
    o   Which personalities might cause the most friction?
    o   What organizational dynamics might represent the hidden landmines?
    o   What historical conflicts may still exist?

2. Dig more deeply to find out more.

    Find a way to discover what's really going on. Confronting people during an open meeting is not usually the best way to ferret out the thoughts and feelings that cause conflict.

    Pick up the phone or drop by to get a better handle on why people feel the way they do. Start with your own direct observations, using objective language. Try something like: "I have noticed that the last few times the topic of a new call handling process has come up, you have expressed your opinion before suddenly leaving the room. Can you help me understand what might be going on for you when this topic comes up?" Ask probing questions until the person gives you better insight as to the source of the conflict from his/her perspective.

Avoid putting anyone on the defensive by using evaluative language such as: "Boy, you seem really peeved about the prospect of a new call handling system! Why are you so upset?"

3. Speak plainly about conflicts right up front

Make sure that everyone acknowledges the proverbial elephant(s) on the table. State the conflicts that you know about as simply as you can. Better yet, put them in writing, either as a handout (sent in advance or passed out at the start of the meeting) or post on flipcharts so that people can refer to them as needed throughout the meeting.

Seek validation that you have accurately described the conflicts, and ask for help in identifying the associated reasoning behind the conflicts.

4. Build in time for meaningful dialogue

Do not short-circuit needed conversations by claiming that you don't have time in the agenda. If you can't find a way to allocate the needed time, then you can reschedule the meeting when you do have the time. Or you might allocate the time you have today for the needed discussions and then set up a follow-on meeting for evaluating options and making decisions.

The fastest way to lose credibility and heighten conflict is to ask people for their viewpoints, give them insufficient time to express them, and then proceed as though no different viewpoints have been heard.

5. State ground rules in advance and be prepared to enforce them

Offer some ground rules to the group and solicit ideas from others. Post ground rules clearly so all participants can keep them in their mind's eye and refer to them as needed. Examples include:

- o Silence does not mean consensus
- o We will speak one at a time
- o We will look at each other when we speak
- o We will paraphrase to ensure understanding
- o We acknowledge all ideas and opinions as valid
- o All ideas will be evaluated using the same criteria
- o We will provide rationale when we express a different perspective
- o We will avoid using the word "but" and will use "and" to build on ideas
- o We will not attack people, but we are free to disagree with ideas
- o We won't dismiss any idea out of hand
- o We will not allow any one person to control the conversation
- o We will not make decisions until all ideas are heard

6. Agree on a decision-making process up front

Don't wait until the end of the meeting, when people may be too worn out to make intelligent decisions. Make sure everyone knows the answers to these questions in advance, preferably prior to the meeting, when emotions might start flying early on.

- o Which criteria are most important? Do some carry more weight than others?
- o Who will make decisions? Will the group use a strictly democratic process, or will only some people have a final decision?
- o How do we know when we have enough information to make a well-informed decision?
- o Does a decision need to be made today?
- o How can we solicit the additional input we need?

7. Decide when to intervene

Depending on your role, you may choose to intervene when conflicts arise if by doing so, the conversation is likely to be more productive. Among the reasons intervention might make sense:

- o One or two people monopolize the conversation
- o People express strong opinions but offer no supporting rationale
- o Several people go silent
- o People interrupt others frequently
- o People dismiss other ideas out of hand
- o People don't seem to be listening to different points of view
- o Comments become personal attacks
- o Digressions become derailments
- o Disagreements become circular and can't be resolved

8. Decide how to intervene

Interventions can sometimes make matters worse, so proceed with caution.

- o Describe what you're seeing based on direct observation. Example: "Paul, every time Joanne or Warren begin to describe their ideas for a new employee suggestion program, you roll your eyes and start to whisper to Alan."
- o State the impact this behavior has. Example: "Every time this happened, Joanne and Warren have stopped talking. Everyone else who originally volunteered ideas also seemed to shut down."

       o Suggest options for moving forward. You can appeal to the group for their ideas, or offer one or two of your own. Example: "Paul, do you think it might be possible for you to listen to each idea, and perhaps take a few notes about each one. I'll make sure to cycle back to you to hear how your ideas might differ. Then together we can determine which ideas to build on. Does this approach make sense?"

9. Make sure everyone is heard

Not everyone will volunteer his/her ideas in front of others—especially if they dissent from the opinions held by the majority. If you can't find a non-threatening way to discover opinions from everyone during a meeting, try pulling aside people during a break. If you're using meeting technology, you might send an IM to probe for other viewpoints. If appropriate, you might try using a groupware technology that allows for anonymity.

10. Be prepared to postpone making a decision

Don't force a meeting to an unnatural conclusion if you feel that conflicts remain. State your intentions to reconvene as a whole group or as a subset, and explain your reasons. Be clear about the conflicts that you believe still exist and validate with group members. Ask for help from the group as to what additional information, from whom, is still needed to enable the group to make a well-informed decision. Suggest whether offline conversations might be helpful, especially if the chief conflicts exist between just a couple of participants.

11. Thank everyone for their courage, conviction and candor

Acknowledge how difficult it is for some to disagree, especially when doing so might appear to slow things down or make some people angry. Reflect on ways the conversations today have helped everyone to learn something new. Summarize how hearing different perspectives will ultimately help the group come up with a better solution.