

THE BEAUTY OF CONFLICT

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Conflict.

Most of us avoid it like crazy. But what if harnessing conflict was your best chance to build trust, transform relationships, and create championship teams that produce greatness? What if it's a healthy thing for a team to erupt so that they can transform from the ashes?

All of the evidence says that nothing is more powerful and transformational than people working together and enhancing their relationships while reaching for phenomenal business results. The latest brain research shows that our creativity kicks in when our brains have access to competing ideas. It's like an all you can eat buffet of possibilities—that causes our subconscious minds to mix and match ideas in fresh ways our conscious brain wouldn't. This is why it's so crucial that a leader encourage conflict on their team—and the tension and ambiguity that comes along with it. Without that tension and the disagreement, there is no creativity.

But, the fact is most people weren't trained to embrace conflict, nor were we provided good models growing up. It's easy to think that conflict can only be painful and an impediment to work. That causes us to opt out and we make conscious choices to avoid, manage, or defuse it by choosing to either overpower the situation to end and win an argument or going silent to keep the peace.

At first glance this approach seems like a good idea at an individual level. After all, who wants to experience the discomfort, other people's reactions, or all of the tension and ambiguity that conflict brings?



But here's the truth that most of us know, especially if we have been on dysfunctional, going nowhere teams:

When leaders and teams avoid, manage, or defuse conflict, they wind up mired in politics, gossip, and back channel maneuvering. Team meetings are boring, as people defer to the leader or the loudest member. Team members are uninspired, or worse, disengaged, and their performance is mediocre at best. Ultimately, turnover increases because no one wants to stay on a team that's dysfunctional or mediocre at best.

Sound familiar?

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If it does, you are not alone. In a 2014 Gallup survey of employee engagement, only 31.5% of employees were “engaged” (psychologically committed and making positive contributions at work), 51% of employees were disengaged, and 17.5% were actively disengaged. We believe there’s a direct correlation between employee engagement and the degree to which people embrace and use conflict. If we are going to build great teams that trust each other and win, we have to opt in to conflict and use it. Tension can be your friend, if you use it correctly.

Conflict occurs when there are strong emotions, differing opinions and high stakes. Now, doesn’t that sound like a leadership team meeting?

The challenge is that many smart, passionate people are so used to trusting themselves and their judgment that they have run the risk of overlooking the major benefit of what we call “collective creativity.” That’s when the best of one idea gets mixed with the best of someone else’s idea, and that new idea emerges as something far more innovative and clever than any one person’s plan!

Now, that mixing of ideas takes tolerance, vulnerability, and curiosity from the leader and the team, but when they’ve got the skills and structure to make sure that happens consistently, something completely new becomes possible.

But there are impediments to having this kind of uber-creative team that uses conflict to its advantage. Most of you reading this have been on teams where there was underlying and unresolved conflict. As long as the team members find ways to opt out of conflict, rather than opting in, the problems will linger, the dysfunction will grow and performance and engagement will plummet.

See if you recognize any of these opting out styles:

Superstar

Superstars often feel impatient at work, especially in meetings. They think, “I know what we need to do. I’ll never get them to agree. I’ll just do it myself, and they’ll thank me later.”

This opt-out style involves a high focus on self, what we call “the ME.” If this is you, it means that when there is tension, you believe action will relieve the pressure. You feel an internal sense of urgency. You believe you already know the right answer or at least a good enough answer, and that getting everyone on board is an unnecessary waste of your and their time.

Superstars are so focused on their own perspective that they can, and often do, ignore, dismiss, or even bully others. Sometimes this behavior is so unconscious that as a Superstar, you actually believe you’re doing what is best and most efficient, and that people will thank you in the end for making it all happen.

Superstar key attributes:

- Need: Action and results.
- Focus: On the ME—what I think, feel, and want.
- Point of view: I’ll speak up about my opinion, and assume others will as well.
- Verbal: Dominant in tone and speech.
- Behavior: Do it myself for the good of the team.

Observable signs of a Superstar:

- Actively moves the meeting along.
- Appears impatient, paces, taps the desk, and interrupts.
- Focused on moving the task forward.
- Doing what you think is best, even though the team has not agreed on a path forward.
- Dismissive or unaware of other people's reservations about going forward.

Superstar blind spots:

Superstars are often unaware that they have left the other team members behind. As a result, they don't leverage the team's ideas or IQ. People with this opt-out style decide what is right for the team without checking in to see if people are on board or have other good ideas. The result is a suboptimal solution, limited buy-in, and usually tough implementation.

Leadership takeaway:

If you have this opt-out style, you tend to miss developing the skills and leadership abilities of the team, and that leaves you to carry the load. Your growth, and the team results, will improve when you notice your sense of urgency to do it yourself. Then, rather than acting on it, you can run your decision by the team or by someone who knows your tendency, to see if you're in your blind spot.

Accommodator

In a meeting with conflict, an Accommodator is often uncomfortable and thinking, “This is not okay. I’ve just got to get these two people to agree on something.” You might interject with something like, “I think what she meant to say is ...” or smooth tension with, “I don’t think we need to get upset about this.”

An individual with this opt-out style has a high focus on others, or “the WE.” If this is you, in the midst of tension, you focus on what others are saying, doing, wanting, and feeling. In fact, you probably do this so much that you stop being aware of what you think, feel, and want, and don’t bring your own opinion forward.

In your discomfort with disagreements, raised voices, or signs of aggressive behavior, you as an Accommodator believe that helping others get along will relieve the tension. You work to reduce tension or upset by facilitating the discussion in meetings or approaching each person individually and managing conflict with one-on-one conversations.

When leaders and teams avoid, manage, or defuse conflict, they wind up mired in politics, gossip, and back channel maneuvering.

The Accommodator's intense fear of conflict is the basis of this belief. You tend to think that teams and relationships are "good" only when everyone gets along and everything is smooth. Because of this, you focus on minimizing tension and disruptions. You come across as a peacekeeper by asking questions, facilitating the discussion, and rarely adding your own point of view.

As an Accommodator you tend to ignore yourself and can be quite out of touch with your own inner world. While you are gifted at reading the signs and cues from others, you miss yourself; meaning your opinion, gifts, feelings, and intention. You leave this out of the interaction as you busily help rebuild bridges between others.

Accommodator key attributes:

- Need: Peace and harmony.
- Focus: On the WE, I just want people to get along.
- Point of view: I don't reveal my opinion, but I am curious about other's opinions.
- Verbal: Asking questions, conciliatory, and repeating back.
- Behavior: Nodding, direct eye contact, and leaning in to the other people.
- Behavior: Actively try to keep people settled, happy, and on task together.

Observable signs of an Accommodator:

- Triangulates: approaches each person individually to get them to agree with each other.
- Offers to do something no one else will do just to end the standoff.
- Exhibits a strong desire for harmony in words or actions: “All for one, and one for all!”

Accommodator blind spots:

Accommodators fail to recognize that in all their efforts to create harmony on the team, they leave out a critical ingredient: themselves. Accommodators often don't contribute their own opinion. In the need for harmony, they short-circuit real team discussions. Accommodators over-manage the situation and get in the way of rich, real discussions that leverage the different opinions of the team members.

In the end, Accommodators often feel over-burdened and underappreciated in the attempts to manage conversations, volunteer for extra work, and take on the responsibility of settling conflict. While no one asks Accommodators to do these extra jobs, you feel compelled to volunteer because no one else is signing up.

Leadership takeaway:

When you lead as an Accommodator, you keep your real thoughts, feelings, and desires to yourself. This leads to disappointment because the team doesn't understand what you want. The team needs and misses out on your direction, opinions, and critical feedback. Your growth and the team results will improve as you learn to speak up, directly give your real opinion, and tolerate the tension of people being upset.

Separator

Separators feel detached and disengaged during conflict. They think, “I’m sure they’ll work it out at some point. In the meantime, I’ll just check my e-mail.”

This opt-out style focuses strongly on other parts of the business than the topic at hand. If you’re a Separator, in the midst of tension, you ignore or block your own opinion (the ME) and the human dynamics in the room (the WE). Instead, you tend to focus on the business, but not the current business issue causing the conflict. You are most comfortable working, so when tension arises, you disengage. You pride yourself on having the right data and the correct answer. Often, the interpersonal dynamics seem unnecessary to you and, thus, better ignored.

Mixing of ideas takes tolerance, vulnerability, and curiosity from the leader and the team, but when they’ve got the skills and structure to make sure that happens consistently, something completely new becomes possible.

As a Separator you prefer calm. If you can't get clarity on the current team problem, you'll focus on something else entirely, right in the midst of the meeting. You'll check e-mail or chat with the person next to you about something entirely different. You tend to think you're efficient or autonomous: "I'll just stay busy while they work it out."

When you do speak up as the Separator, you are often detached, rational, and calm. You prefer to focus on the data or bring up a completely different topic than the conflict on the table. Underlying your behavior is a desire to distance yourself from the chaos and messiness of the human dynamics. The Separator finds the inner workings of a problem to be safer ground than the inner workings of people. You appear indifferent, detached, or even dismissive.

Separator key attributes:

- Need: Clarity and calm.
- Focus: On a different business problem.
- Point of view: Don't reveal your opinion, and aren't curious about others' opinions.
- Verbal: Rational, calm, and detached when speaking, or completely silent.
- Behavior: Disengage to focus on something different.

Observable signs of a Separator:

- Goes quiet in meetings.
- Talks to someone about something else entirely.

- Disengages and checks e-mail when disagreements arise.
- Focuses on other projects unrelated to the meeting.

Separator blind spots:

Separators are typically unaware of how their behavior impacts the group. They essentially abandon the team, letting “them” work it out without engaging. They don’t realize that developing clarity depends on their contribution even amidst human chaos.

Leadership takeaway:

As you lead and opt out as a Separator, you often focus on doing your own thing and miss the insights and input from team discussions. In your preference for calm and clarity, you tend to lead a team as a group of subject matter experts rather than driving the team to work collectively. Your growth, and the team results, will improve as you notice your tendency to work alone versus engaging in team meetings and driving collective goals.

Good Intentions, Poor Effectiveness

These three opt-out styles are simply habits. When you feel tension in the middle of a meeting, it’s easy to believe that the problem is “out there,” and that the triggers are external. But, it is your own internal discomfort and sense of being out of control that causes your greatest discomfort.

These three opt-out styles are natural, ingrained responses to that discomfort—and they are typically remnants of coping methods learned growing up. The behaviors are usually automatic, unconscious, and repetitive. You may have your go-to opt-out choice or you may dabble in all of them, depending on the circumstances.

Your intentions are pure. You want to do what is best for yourself, the team, and the project by opting out. Each opt-out style has an element of good intention:

- Being efficient, getting to the right answer quickly, and implementation.
- Keeping people happy, smoothing relationships, and creating team harmony.
- Staying clear, level headed, and focused on the work.

Behind each of these intentions is the desire to maintain or reestablish control. The problem is, control doesn't lead to creativity; chaos does, which we know in business is counter-cultural.

As long as the team members find ways to opt out of conflict, rather than opting in, the problems will linger, the dysfunction will grow and performance and engagement will plummet.

None of these intentions is likely to build a strong, resilient, innovative team. These opt-out styles fail to leverage the diversity of the team members by defusing the tension and ambiguity needed to create innovative solutions. These styles undermine team success.

Learning how and having the courage to use the energy of conflict during tough conversations can change business failure and business success.

Whether it's a team of two people or twelve, being vulnerable and real (the ME) and being curious about the other by checking out your stories (the WE), are the raw ingredients that transform conflict into team brilliance. The focus shifts from my way or your way and opens possibilities for a whole new way. The magic is right at your fingertips, and it is free!

This system helps your team reach innovation and transformation—not just once, but repeatedly. A natural inspiration fuels you, the team, and the business. It's the catalyst that turns lead into gold, and the team awakens their creative genius. It's the very essence of what we call “collective creativity.” The experience is unmistakable. It feels expansive, exciting, and inspiring. Success and fulfillment abound, the bottom line grows.

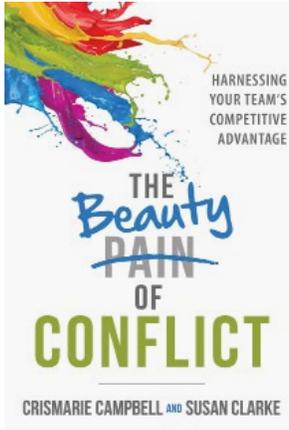
What will you choose: avoid or use?

People in business are always looking for the next big thing. We strongly believe that the next big thing isn't “out there,” it's within and between you and your people.

Simply put: you, me, and results matter. When we hold the tension that rises with that combination, magic happens. Opt in to conflict, and you'll have a championship team, not just a group of champions. **Don't settle for anything less than the best for your team and your business!** 📌



Info



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CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke are coaches, business consultants, speakers, and co-authors of *The Beauty of Conflict: Harnessing Your Team's Competitive Advantage* (November 1, 2017).

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