

Frustrated By Repeated Conflicts?

How A Leader's Perspective Shapes Team Conflict

Workplace conflict is like driving in rush hour traffic. On an icy day. With low visibility.

Some drivers speed along, weaving in and out of traffic. Gesticulating as they go. Blowing through red lights.

Other drivers clearly would prefer not to be on the road. So, they crawl along at a parking lot pace.

Naturally, the normal drivers (you and I) are driving the appropriate speed for the conditions, watching out for everyone else, hands at 10 and 2, no distracting noise/phones/kids in the car.

We are the ones that have to either get out of the faster or slower driver's way. Or to choose to hold our own, not letting them pass, blocking them in, riding their tail or practice sign language.

It's only reasonable that any near-miss or accident is primarily the fault of the other drivers. Because, we were just trying to get where we were going. We're not nuts. They are.

I've never met a driver (regardless of age, ability or capacity) who didn't think that their driving was the most reasonable approach to the roads!

Just like how an average driver is persuaded that their approach to driving is the most reasonable, most leaders believe that their approach to conflict is the most reasonable.

Which is why it is so confusing to get rear-ended. Or to rear-end someone else.

It clearly wasn't our fault.

But what if we could learn to drive in a way where accidents weren't as bad? Or didn't happen at all? Regardless of who else was on the road?

Would we be open to learning about it?

How you relate to conflict, confrontation and healthy tension matters

Leaders have different ways of relating to conflicts. They have different ways to addressing necessary confrontations. Some understand health tension. Many don't.

What's your approach?

Fight or Flight– or Find Opportunities

You've heard this before:

Fight Mode: In conflict, some leaders do their research, prepare their complaints or rebuttals. They rehearse their speeches. They review their options. They pull together allies. They go on the attack.

Of course, the word “retribution” never crosses their mind. But justice does.

Ultimately, there is a fight on. That means a winner or loser. They know they aren't losers. Which means they need to win.

Flight Mode: Others go into flight mode. This most often looks like avoidance. Topics or people are sidestepped. If a concern is brought up, the issues are denied. Allies may be found. Factions formed. Safety in numbers.

If issues are addressed, resolution often stops at the point of catharsis. An airing of grievances. Perhaps pull out an all-purpose apology and hope we can all move on.

But there is no tolerance or openness to really explore resolution.

Finding Opportunities: Some leaders recognize that conflict is usually an opportunity for growth. While they probably didn't want the conflict – they stay curious. They are respectful. They explore personal responsibility.

They aren't interested in finding fault. They are interested in finding ways to grow.

What is your tendency in conflict?

Perception

I've noticed the ability to enjoy an ocean swim is closely associated with how the ocean is perceived.

Swimmers who are convinced that there is a line of sharks and sea monsters just waiting to pull them in – never seem to have any fun. In fact, they rarely really get in the water.

Swimmers who are convinced that they'll enjoy themselves and that they'll return from their swim tired and happy – do have fun.

The actual experience doesn't matter a whole lot. It's the perception of what might happen that often makes the difference.

I've found that most workplace conflicts are often more about perception as opposed to what actually happened.

In fact, of the hundreds of clients I've worked with: I can probably count on one hand (maybe two) the number of situations where all parties to a conflict perceived the problem similarly.

Instead, leaders often anticipate a problem or response and react to their own anticipation. Not to what actually happens. The feeling of these reactions are real. That gives credibility to whatever it is they believe has or will happen.

These errors of perception may be due to a lack of trust. They might be due to projecting personal history or experiences into a situation. They might be due to listening to poor advisors who are happy to see a pot stirred.

The leaders who do the best are those who seek to proof test their perceptions. They seek the objective. The observable.

They allow their perceptions to be corrected. Even if these perceptions are about themselves.

How do you relate to perception in conflict? How likely are you to accept as "fact" something that is a rumor or rushed conclusion?

Power

Whether or not a leader believes that he or she has power or control in a situation often impacts whether or not they choose flight or fight.

Whether they avoid conflict or go on the attack.

Because leaders often do have more power, they are more likely to choose attack options.

However, this isn't necessarily the case.

Sometimes their personal history, their upbringing, their experience causes them to miscalculate the amount of power or influence that they really have.

Regardless, personal power or perception thereof impacts how we tend to relate to conflict.

Are there some situations where you tend to avoid addressing issues?

Are there others where you are more likely to assert yourself?

Beliefs About Healthy Tension

You can't get stronger if you don't stress your body.

Too much physical stress leads to injury.

Not enough physical stress leads to couch potatoes.

It's the same with conflict. Or healthy tension in the workplace.

Too much, too frequent, too intense, disrespectful conflict can lead to damaged trust or relationships.

Avoidance of tension, minimization of important issues and rationalization of poor behavior, performance or boundary violations hurts people and the organization.

However, regular healthy tension leads to better decisions being made, deeper trust and stronger organizations.

Healthy tension is the willingness to appropriately challenge (or accept a challenge) to the status quo. To avoid group think. To utilize accountability. To address poor behavior or performance directly.

Healthy tension is often an expression of honesty delivered with respect.

It requires the existence of trust. It requires a leader with a healthy self-image – who aren't threatened by a challenge.

What are your beliefs about healthy tension? Do you need more of it? Less? How would others describe your relationship with tension?

When Conflict Is Needed

I practice Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. One of the classic elements of the sport is that most gyms incorporate sparring into normal practice times. They schedule in conflict.

As a result, practitioners grow fast. Classes aren't just theory, forms and katas. It's the real thing.

Some people spar too hard. Some people don't spar hard enough. But over time, everyone learns the balance.

That's only possible in the context of conflict. In this case, respectful, "others-minded" conflict. Healthy tension is the idea that conflict is needed at times.

It is appropriate to hold staff accountable for their performance or attitudes.

It is appropriate to hold vendors accountable for the service they were paid for.

It is appropriate to rock the boat at times. To challenge group think. To not accept easy answers. It's not healthy if this never happens.

Being "nice" sometimes hurts people.

What are your thoughts on when conflict is needed? How about who can bring it up? What happens if it feels like someone is too forceful or disrespectful? What happens if it feels like someone isn't asserting themselves enough?

Parting Thoughts

Conflict is inevitable. But it is also necessary.

Creating healthy conflict or healthy tension in your meetings and workplace is important.

It can only happen if you are comfortable with tension. If you can hold off the need for quick resolution or avoidance of the issue for long enough.

If you can model respect. But allow an appropriate amount of struggle.

We all need to grow in how we relate to conflict. Some of us need to learn to be more assertive. Others need to learn to be less. Or how to adjust to the situation or circumstance we are in. But we should never seek to remove or avoid all conflict.

That leads to an atrophy of strength. Poor decision making. A lack of accountability or performance.

It's also not honest. Everyone doesn't agree all of the time. We don't all have the same values. We don't all share the same understanding of things.

Sometimes it needs to be hashed out. The best leaders learn to handle and guide this.

Sometimes they push too hard. Sometimes they don't push hard enough. But they never stop practicing.

If you could just change one thing about how you relate to conflict, what would it be?

What impact would that change have?

What do you need to do to ensure that this change happens?

Take good care,
Christian

LET'S CONNECT!

I work with successful leaders and teams to help them grow their organizations. rage of 20% of their own time is spent on dealing with some kind of conflict.

Are you a motivated leader with a history of accomplishment? Do you identify with any of the following?

- A desire for growth but you feel pretty stretched?
- A sense that your team isn't working as a team?
- Feel stuck getting to the next level of what you want to accomplish?
- A desire to exit your company well (and profitably) but not sure how?
- Need to navigate fast change or growth?
- Want to transform your culture to one that is positive, unified, effective and enjoyable?



Did you answer "yes" to any of these questions? Contact me to learn more or get started!

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