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Inspiring Learning

From Conflict to Collaboration

When people think of conflict, they may think of an embittered battle, the locking of horns or the need to prove right versus wrong. Many view conflict as challenging — something that needs to be managed. Further, many approach conflict with the idea of simply avoiding it. They associate conflict with arguing, and if they aren't arguing, they believe there is no conflict. But understanding conflict and addressing it instead of avoiding it can allow learning and development professionals to harness it and lead teams to better collaboration.

There are five distinct modes people deploy in reacting to and managing conflict. The first is **avoidance**. Those in the avoiding mindset will not argue. They don't care if their point of view is honoured, nor do they care if the other's point of view is honoured. Typically, they believe it is not worth the effort. When issues are trivial, avoiding can be the most appropriate mode.

Basically, the approach is to pick your battles and avoid the ones that do not hold return on investment. Also, if tempers have flared, take a timeout. Agree to get back together after an explicit amount of time; temporarily avoiding can be a powerful way to reduce tension to allow the parties to come back together and be more productive. Going to this avoiding mode too frequently, however, can result in others believing someone has no decision-making ability. If they are important decisions, the festering will eventually become too much.

The second conflict mode is **competing**. Those in competing mode believe, "It's my way or the highway." They need to win at all costs. When tough, unpopular decisions need to be made; these folks can be very useful. They are willing to make the call despite what others think. They are willing to take a stand and not be swayed from it. They will argue for their point regardless of the other points presented. They will throw their weight around if their position or rank will get them what they want. The challenge with overusing the competing mode is that no one will want to present dissenting views. There will be no opportunity for learning. The folks who will be attracted here will only be willing to give welcome messages, omitting other information regardless of how pertinent it is.

The third conflict mode is **accommodating**. An accommodating personality will bend over backward to respect the view of the other, regardless of how

important any of the aspects are. A person in this mode will do what it takes to keep the peace and create goodwill. To some, it will appear to be selflessness, while to others; it will come across as weakness without conviction. This mode can be appropriate when someone is wrong or has lessons to learn from others, as well as when the issue is unimportant to someone and the social credits that could be gained outweigh the need to win. Overuse could lead to a perpetual ignoring of ideas by others. They will be unable to learn from others, restricting influence.

The fourth conflict mode is **compromising**. In compromising, players look to make a deal. A negotiation takes place within compromising — “I’ll give up this, if you’ll give up that.” It’s finding that middle ground where no one is completely happy, but no one is completely miserable. Compromising strives to give and take, the quantity given and the quantity taken being directly tied to negotiation skills. There are times when it makes sense to compromise, like when time is tight and the issue is too complex for a simple right or wrong answer. Because of the strong negotiation tactics that can be used in compromising, this mode can degrade trust between the parties, each believing the other is out to get as much as possible. It can also focus attention only on the aspects that players care about, thereby losing the big-picture aspects.

The final mode is **collaborating**. This looks at the whole picture. It looks to integrate the solutions that allow players to learn from each other, to listen and come up with a solution that is bigger than any individual views. It requires that openness to possibility and a discarding of the concept that any one view is the best view. Collaborating works best when we are open to learning; when the merging of insights will take us to the next level; and when a truly creative solution is needed. Not every situation calls for collaboration. In situations that present a puzzle instead of a problem, collaborating would waste time. Puzzles are situations where there is a known solution and an expert could resolve the challenge.

It is fairly easy to determine how to integrate the first four modes into any given situation: avoiding — just don’t give a hoot and whatever happens, happens; competing — stand your ground no matter what; accommodating — bend over backward to make sure the other person’s needs are met; and compromising — negotiate meeting the other person in the middle so that some needs are met for each of you. Collaborating, on the other hand, needs special attention to be achieved; it requires people to behave in ways that are above and beyond what they usually do. It requires exploring completely to achieve that something that is beyond what anyone has considered.

A few behaviours that make a sizable difference in collaboration are:

- **Team size:** At least four but no more than eight, preferably no more than six. A team with too few people will not possess enough diversity of thought. The larger the team, the harder it is to get to a decision.
- **Questions:** Be sure to draw the views of all participants into the discussion.
- **Process checks:** Make sure the team members are processing in a manner that serves them in the best possible way.
- **Identifying the real problem:** Before moving to a solution, identify what needs to be fixed or what the opportunity is.
- **Listening:** Truly listen to what others on the team are saying.

It is only through **collaborative**; open processes that truly **creative solutions** can be found to today's problems. Today's world is changing too fast to simply improve on yesterday's benchmarks. If it is benchmark able, anyone can improve on it. What are needed are solutions that will take organizations to the next level of benchmark, the benchmark that will leave the competition scrambling to catch up. **Through collaborative processes, these powerfully creative solutions can be achieved.**

Think about your natural conflict style. Is it mentioned above?

How could it be better? Begin with the end in mind

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