



Challenge. Discover. Transform.

CONFLICT...EQUALS...COLLABORATION*

How can people in an organization work together? They can work together effectively when they understand the positive power of conflict. Start by eliminating the highly charged word "conflict" and substitute the concept of sharing data or perceptions.

Why bother? Some benefits are: a unified face to suppliers/customers; faster internal decision making; shared resources reduce costs; more inventive and timely results.

Why is collaboration so difficult to achieve? We focus on the symptoms not the root cause. Initiatives to improve collaboration tend to focus on team building when the root cause is conflict. Efforts to foster collaboration cover up conflict instead of addressing it.

Examples of well intended conflict cover ups are:

1. We have to do a better job of teaming. This may work in a regulated environment of a workshop, however, the reality of conflict isn't dealt with so when there is pressure good intentions disappear.
2. We can incentivise the right people and ensure collaboration. Sounds good but the key players revert back to, "If I perform well my boss will take care of me. That is what counts." This is their old pattern, it's worked in the past, so why bother with the extra time and aggravation of the new unproven, and untested system?
3. We can structure the organization for collaboration. Requests will come or are directed to the committee or hub; the hub will evaluate the needs, and then assign resources and priorities. This does not address conflicts, takes too much time and the lobbying is so intense that the process breaks down.

What works? The solutions that work over time are to a) provide people with the criteria for making trade-offs, b) use escalation or pass the conflict up the ladder as an opportunity to train each other in how to deal with conflict and c) instead of hiding conflict, track it.

a) Provide people with the criteria for making trade-offs which will help guide the conflict. This process makes conflict less contentious and personal. It is not easy to reduce complex ideas to simple guidelines nor do we allocate time to do so. Leadership may not know what they want until conflict forces them to think it through.

An added benefit of establishing criteria is this sends the signal that management expects conflict. When two or more people are assembled there may be conflict. It's not the conflict that is the problem it is the way we don't deal with it or the ineffective way we do deal with it.

Our ineffectiveness is highlighted by, "Let's agree to disagree." Translation, "I'll avoid this." Or "I'll be passive now but I'll get even later." Or "I'll handle this by talking behind your back."

Another is, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything." This may work in casual social situation but not in an enterprise that expects results.

b) Use escalation of conflict as an opportunity to train each other in how to deal with conflict. Some inherent problems with escalation are: upper management is too removed from the situation to fully understand it; the employees are not building their resolution skills; employees may not own the solution; management can't do their job because of the volume of disputes; management gets hooked on making decisions instead of letting those who know the problems work through it.

When conflict can't be resolved then managers are drawn into the web. They back their man and so does the other manager(s) which results in less flexibility and the likely hood of politics winning, not the enterprise.

What to do? All deadlocks should be presented jointly to their boss(es). Consider asking in advance of the meeting that the involved parties present a one page fact sheet to each other.

c) Instead of hiding conflict, track the cause. Conflict is a learning opportunity and a way of identifying patterns. The causes of conflict can lead to organizational solutions. Also, share how conflict is resolved and remove "behind closed doors" stigma.

* Thanks to Jeff Weiss and Jonathan Hughes for their article, "Want Collaboration?" and to my clients for educating me.