

Trying to Make Everyone Happy Is Making Them Miserable

By Liane Davey, Ph.D.

As a team effectiveness advisor, I understand the importance of civility in the workplace. Unfortunately, I see the desire for civility being misinterpreted as the need to keep everything happy and harmonious. In my experience, our propensity to duck, dodge and defer the conflict that is inevitable in organizations is only redirecting, intensifying and embedding it in our teams. I call this phenomenon “conflict debt.”

Conflict debt is the sum of all the undiscussed and unresolved issues that need to be dealt with before team members can move forward. Conflict debt is incredibly common for two reasons.

First, conflict is a given in organizations. From the most strategic decisions such as how to make tough trade-offs between priorities to the most mundane like how to allocate workload, the ongoing operations of an organization require conflict. That would be OK were it not for the second fact that while organizations require conflict, humans run from it. Humans are naturally conflict-averse, and this tendency is only strengthened by our socialization at home and at work to see conflict as not nice, impolite or uncivil. The result is mounting conflict debt.

As with any debt, the original cost compounds as it goes unpaid. Accumulating conflict debt often produces growing misalignment, erodes trust and increases stress. Once a conflict has been avoided for a while, time-consuming, delicate work is required to extricate the team from the mess that members created. In trying to make everything happy and harmonious, they actually made everyone miserable.

The Answer Must Be Systemic

For the most part, human resources’ answer to insufficient conflict has been to teach conflict skills. We deliver excellent training on difficult, fierce and crucial conversations.

The problem is that we are building a skillset that most employees do not use. We solve for the productive conflict skill, but not for the will to initiate conflict in order to move past it. Many participants smile, nod and leave conflict training sessions with absolutely no intention of ever applying what they just learned. Some, to their credit, attempt to pay down their conflict debt but quickly become exhausted by the gumption required to face so many uncomfortable situations and the less-than-favorable responses they get when they do.

What we really need to focus on is making conflict more frequent, lower-impact and more of an ongoing habit rather than a major event. How do we, as HR professionals, do things that will help employees face fewer unpleasant and uncomfortable conflicts? Here are three ideas you can introduce in your own organization.

Neutralize Potential Conflicts

The frenetic culture that exists at many organizations causes leaders to shortchange planning in favor of action. The irony is that failing to clarify expectations actually slows things down and sets in motion the uncomfortable dynamics of judgment, disappointment and frustration after the fact.

These misunderstandings can be prevented by helping leadership teams clarify roles and set expectations from the outset. Better clarifying expectations will neutralize several very common sources of team conflict such as an absentee boss who is delegating without providing direction or context, a micromanaging boss who is unable or unwilling to delegate, a lackadaisical front-line manager who is not providing sufficient review and coaching, or an overly confident employee who is resisting feedback from above. In short, facilitating more conversations about what is expected of everyone will eliminate many of the conflicts that develop when people do not know what is expected of them.



Normalize Required Conflicts

While many unproductive conflicts can be eliminated completely by clarifying expectations, other conflicts are normal and healthy parts of organizational life. Unfortunately, people tend to misinterpret productive tensions as unpleasant friction. We can help everyone see that tension is integral to decision-making and reduce the likelihood that tensions will erupt into unproductive conflict.

A good way to normalize conflict among team members is to map out the unique value of each role and list the tensions that should exist among those roles. For each role, ask and answer three sets of questions:

- What is the unique value of your role on this team? What are you paying attention to that no one else is? What would we miss if your role was not here?
- Which stakeholders is your role most focused on? Who do you serve? Who measures your success?
- What is the most common tension you put on team discussions? What one thing do you have to say in your role that frequently makes others bristle?

Articulating the productive tensions on teams and emphasizing that those tensions should exist will help employees reframe disagreements so they no longer default to perceiving personal hostility. A question or counterproposal can then be understood as the other person living up to the obligations of his or her role.

Reframing conflict as normal allows team members to do things like address a person who is advocating too hard for a narrow point of view and break out of siloed thinking that is encouraged by differing performance objectives. Possessing a heightened awareness and shared language of normalized conflict also enables employees to make up for the loss of a team member who has

stopped adding unique value and, as a result, left the team exposed in some way or to correct an imbalance on a team composed of multiple incumbents in one role who overpower the single-incumbent roles. By recognizing and engaging in normalized conflict, team members will start to realize that much of what they have been interpreting as interpersonal friction has actually been perfectly healthy role-based tension.

Establish a Conflict Habit

Once you change the mindset in your organization about the importance of productive conflict, you need to reinforce the behaviors that foster a productive conflict culture. The goal is for productive conflict to become a habit that employees engage in routinely without giving it significant attention or effort.

The secret is to increase the frequency of conflicts while decreasing the intensity of those conflicts until airing and resolving tensions becomes a habit that is so natural and normal that no one raises an eyebrow when conflict occurs. When conflict becomes habitual, people stop taking things personally and no longer allow their emotions to scuttle conversations. They do not bother getting defensive; they just work through issues and move on.

There are many ways to introduce healthy conflict, particularly during meetings. For instance, conduct meetings according to ground rules under which everyone is expected to improve the quality of the discussion by doing one or more of the following things:

- Test statements passed off as facts by asking for supporting evidence,
- Introduce diversity by exploring a different side of an issue or

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thinking from the point of view of another stakeholder, and/or

- Expose risks in plans by highlighting assumptions or imagining the implications.

Do not, however, try to build a conflict habit by starting with the most contentious issue that team members have kept buried for months. Instead, inculcate the habit over time by teaching people to become comfortable being uncomfortable.

Prevent Unproductive Conflict

Organizations require conflict, but humans run from it. If we are going to close this gap, we need to do more than train employees in conversation techniques.

As HR professionals, we have a critical role to play in creating a culture of productive conflict. First, we must do a better job of clarifying expectations so we can neutralize many conflicts before they happen. Next, we need to normalize productive tensions among team members so questions and counterproposals do not get interpreted as personal attacks. Finally, we need to make frequently airing and resolving low-impact conflicts a habit.

Liane Davey, Ph.D. is the New York Times bestselling author of You First. Her new book, The Good Fight: Use Productive Conflict to Get Your Team and Your Organization Back on Track, was released in March 2019. You can follow Davey on Twitter and learn more about her work by visiting her website. —N

From the Editor

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The Leadership Roadmap column from Andrew Rahaman, Ed.D., explicates how managers and organizational leadership can “Address the Real Reasons Employees Resist Change.” A key insight is that the number-one job in selling a change is answering the question of why.

As Rahaman observes, “People in complex, interactive organizations crave stability and routine. Employees who say they like the old way of doing things often just mean they grew accustomed to processes and procedures. Additionally, employees can fear having to learn a skill and appearing even temporarily less than fully competent. Some people simply do not want to deal with the stress of joining a new team.”

Be sure to review recent employment law rulings in the monthly Labor Relations column, and send your feature article ideas to me at elamb@ipma-hr.org. Analyses of and practical advice on sex and gender in employment, as well as labor issues in the public sector, are especially welcome.



Ed Lamb