

# When Conflict Happens: Navigating Difficult Interactions in Senior Teams – Fostering a Culture of Constructive Engagement

By Carl Robinson, Ph.D.

One of the most important ingredients for success in any business is to hire smart, confident and assertive people. However, when you do, you're sure to have conflict. It's impossible to put a bunch of smart, assertive people together without them bumping heads. In fact, if there isn't conflict, then something may be very wrong since nothing creative ever happens in boring, non-confrontational environments.

A lack of overt conflict can be a symptom of apathy: a team of people who don't really care what happens or are simply biding time and don't want to rock the boat. Worse still, the team could be well practiced at conflict avoidance and passive aggression. In conflict avoidant or passive aggressive teams, conflict shows up in subversive ways, e.g., back stabbing, or failing to deliver a commitment on the date to which the requesting executive thought his fellow executives had agreed to deliver. The challenge for the effective leader is to help all those smart people navigate conflict effectively in spite of their reluctance to engage constructively.

## What Causes Conflict?

When smart people interact they will inevitably have differences in opinions, but that does not mean that the discussion must turn destructive. One of the main reasons people end up fighting is that they take the differences in ideas too personally. It then becomes very difficult to discuss and evaluate the ideas or "opinions" objectively because we end up defending our "selves" rather than debating the merit of our ideas. You know someone is taking it too personally if it feels like they are fighting for their life.

Another reason for conflict is that people think and communicate differently—they have stylistic clashes. For example, we all know people who are analytical thinkers, who think in a linear fashion and then there are people who are more intuitive, who seem to develop ideas that simply don't make logical sense. Entrepreneurs, for example, tend to be more intuitive yet, to successfully raise money for their ideas, they have to learn how to communicate a logical business case once they've captured the emotional interest of investors.



**Carl Robinson, Ph.D.**, is a business psychologist and executive coach in Seattle who focuses on the development of high performance leaders. Dr. Robinson has over 20 years experience using research based, proven in the trenches, motivational and performance enhancement technologies to help individuals and organizations improve their effectiveness.

His clients come from a variety of industries and organizations primarily centered on companies who offer intellectually based products and services in highly competitive, volatile markets with people who are intelligent, creative and usually impatient. Contact Carl at 206.545.1990 or via email at [carl@leadershipconsulting.com](mailto:carl@leadershipconsulting.com)

Unfortunately, each type often refers to the other's thinking style in pejorative terms. Analytical people call intuitive thinkers, "flakey" and intuitives will call analytical thinkers too "black and white" or "dense."

## How people deal with conflict

There are generally four ways most people handle conflict:

1. **Passive Aggression.** They do and say nothing directly, act powerless and then complain to others or act out in subversive ways, e.g., forget to provide an important document when promised.
2. **Avoidance.** They keep away from the conflict by, for example, pretending that everything is ok to the point that if they are directly asked, "Do you have any concerns that you want to express?" They will say, "No." Or, they may simply not speak up in a contentious meeting because they do not want to add any fuel to the fire...???
3. **Adapt.** They change their own opinion either because they found sufficient reasons to do so or simply to avoid continued confrontation.
4. **Assertively confront.** They address the issue openly, candidly and objectively by communicating with the other party.

Confronting conflict head-on is one of the hardest things for people to do. I've rarely, in the 30 plus years I've worked with executives and other individuals encountered anyone who is *consistently* comfortable assertively confronting others – especially when it's delivering difficult news, e.g., "You are causing me problems." Some of the most seasoned CEOs often express sentiments such as "I don't know what it is about X but it is just so

hard talking to him. I know it's going to be a difficult conversation and so I find myself putting it off."

More problematic, (and unfortunately, more common) are the executives who truly believe they had a very honest and direct conversation with their problem employee or counterpart and it turns out that the other person heard a very watered down version with unclear follow up expectations.

## Developing a culture of constructive engagement

The most important prerequisite to resolving conflict and to foster an environment where people participate in constructive engagement is that the executive in charge must set the proper tone. Leadership really does matter.

Recently I worked with a privately held company (\$200 million in yearly revenue) where the CEO (since retired) had a reputation for being the consummate gentleman and someone who had a difficult time giving constructive developmental feedback to his subordinates. If you were not doing well, you found out only at your yearly performance review when it was often too late to turn the CEO's opinion around. Unsurprisingly, everyone joked about how "conflict avoidant" everyone in the organization was.

Once the CEO announced he was retiring, a door to change began to open. The president of the largest division (80% percent of the company's revenue), who was my executive coaching client, decided to attack the "conflict avoidant" mentality within his division. He identified an important business issue with two strong opposing factions within his leadership team that needed to be resolved and pulled together the executives involved. He contracted with me to "teach them how to 'creatively' solve the problem" and to learn how to

"navigate conflict more effectively." He told his team very clearly: "We don't deal with conflict well and I want us to learn how to be more effectively at handling it." In addition, he stated publicly that one of his personal coaching goals was to get better at handling difficult conversations. Thus, acting as a strong role model, he helped normalize and humanize the issue. We then spent the next nine weeks working together as a team to learn how to engage constructively while solving this important business problem. We used the following 9-step process intended to navigate difficult interaction in senior teams:

1. Develop ground rules
2. Choose a facilitator
3. Uncover the details of the problem and its history
4. Examine the facts and clarify perceptions
5. Focus on individual and shared needs
6. Develop multiple options for solving the issue
7. Develop doable next steps
8. Make mutual-beneficial agreements
9. Refine and revise periodically

Let's examine each one of these steps in detail:

### Step 1: Develop Ground Rules for Constructive Engagement

The first critical step is to develop a set of ground rules for how people will engage each other in an organization, and, of course, follow and enforce those ground rules. It's a simple fact of the human condition that people need some guidelines to help govern their behavior. Simply hoping that everyone will rise to the occasion and behave rationally is naïve. Again, leadership matters and simply putting a plague on the wall with your corporate ground rules or values is not sufficient. The leaders

must consistently model and enforce the ground rules. I'm sure that Enron had set up corporate values that would have made Kenneth Lay's mother proud, and yet we know the rest of that story! I have found that the following ground rules that I've adapted and augmented from Roger Schwarz's, *The Skilled Facilitator* (Jossey-Bass 2002) work well.

### **Roger Schwarz's Ground Rules for Constructive Engagement:**

**Assume good intent.** It's a common misconception that when conflict happens that at least one of the involved parties is belligerent or self-centered. Generally, each simply has a strongly held opinion and if you can move the conversation to examining the facts vs. responding to the emotions around the issue, tension can generally be reduced.

**Share all relevant information.** When you share all relevant information, you share all the information about the contentious issue. To foster trust, no one should hold back/horde information to gain an upper hand. The playing field must be level.

**Test assumptions and inferences.** When you test assumptions and inferences, you ask others whether the meaning you make of their behavior is the meaning they make of it. You ask, in effect, "I think you meant X. Am I correct in my interpretation?"

**Explain your reasoning and intent.** As you explain your reasoning and intent, you share relevant information about the logic and motives behind your statements, questions, and actions. This helps reduce unnecessary tension that happens when people are unclear about your motivations.

**Combine advocacy with inquiry.** When you combine advocacy with inquiry you (1) explain your point of view including the reasoning you use

to get there, (2) ask others about their point of view, and (3) invite others to ask you questions about your point of view. This also means that you must be willing to subject your ideas to rigorous scrutiny. You must be able to provide facts and data to support your position. Simply having a strongly felt opinion is not sufficient to justify your position. The analogy within the scientific community would be to subject your research findings to rigorous "peer review."

**Jointly design next steps and ways to test disagreements.** When you use this ground rule, you discuss and agree with others what next steps to take, including how you can test or resolve any disagreements you have.

**Discuss undiscussable issues in a respectful manner.** An undiscussable (frequently called the "elephant in the room") issue is one that is relevant to the group but is reducing the group's effectiveness. People believe that they cannot discuss this issue without creating defensiveness or other negative consequences. Via this ground rule you can discuss these issues fruitfully and reduce the level of defensiveness.

**Develop and use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.** This ground rule recognizes that the extent to which individuals involved need to be internally committed to a decision for it to be implemented effectively is often commensurate with their involvement in making the decision. In some circumstances, generally where broad buy-in is needed, i.e., a situation that has long-term impact or broad impact on the company, you need to involve more people in the decision making. If the issue is highly contentious, having a decision rule to which everyone agrees in advance tends to encourage greater commitment to the decision, even if some people don't fully agree with it.

For example, the team might agree in advance that for a particular contentious issue, they will pick from several proposed solutions/outcomes by a majority vote or, they may opt for reaching a consensus. In some cases, the group may fall back to having the executive in charge make the final call, but only after the group has come to a consensus with a solution that is ready for the executive to give her final stamp of approval. The executive-in-charge's decision is guided by the group's input, thus ensuring a sense of fairness.

### **Step 2: Select a facilitator**

Supervision is usually needed when team environments become unproductive or hostile. In most contentious situations, the parties involved are too emotionally caught up to objectively and dispassionately manage the conflict resolution process by themselves. In some circumstances another colleague can be enlisted to help facilitate the process, while others will require the executive in charge. Occasionally, help from outside the organization will be needed, but if you can develop the internal capability to "referee" conflicts, most issues can be handled effectively. The facilitator does not need to be a subject matter expert in regards to the issue at hand or even the particular business, but they do need to be someone who all the parties involved trust as being fair and impartial.

The facilitator's job is to be sure that everyone is fully heard and that the remaining steps are followed.

### **Step 3: Uncover the details and history related to the issue**

Everyone's position must be heard. The parties involved must provide all the relevant details about the situation including any information

about previous attempts to solve the problem. You want to have all concerned parties approach the situation as “scientists” who are trying to solve a problem – together. It’s imperative that all voices are heard, no matter how hesitant. Too often, very assertive and articulate people push their agenda and the less assertive or articulate person then feels unheard or, worse still, “bullied” or “run-over.” As a consequence, the more assertive/articulate person may win the argument while the other party is resentful and then may end up resisting, often passive aggressively, the outcome.

#### **Step 4: Examine the facts and clarify perceptions**

This is where the ground rule about “combining advocacy and inquiry” is most needed. Rather than approaching the issues as attorneys might—trying to prove the other wrong—approach it from the position of trying to “solve a mystery/problem” together. Try to determine what is really at issue, and that everyone involved understands the problem and what is at stake. The facilitator’s role is most important during this step because he or she must help the participants separate “facts” from “opinions” and maintain a dispassionate attitude toward examining the facts and resolving the conflict.

#### **Step 5: Value individual and shared needs**

It’s imperative that the parties involved understand each other’s real needs vs. wishes. You need to ask, “What does each party really need to reach an acceptable resolution?” Whenever one party feels that their “needs” are devalued and not met, resistance to resolution will follow. By understanding and then attempting to support each party in satisfying their needs, you will be more likely

to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

#### **Step 6: Develop multiple options for solving the issue**

In finding solutions to contentious issues, consider four or five options at once—even some you don’t support. Conflict is stressful and when people are under stress they tend to hold on to preconceived ideas and have a difficult time imagining other alternatives. Brainstorming multiple options can break through any preconceived limiting solutions. This diffuses conflict, preventing the involved parties from polarizing around just two possibilities. Multiple options make it easier to find a compromise or hybrid position that lies somewhere in between two extreme positions.

#### **Step 7: Develop doable next steps**

Think of doable next steps as stepping-stones along the pathway of resolving conflict. Doable next steps are reasonable, achievable small solutions or actions leading to a macro solution. As you complete each doable step, everyone involved will begin to feel more hopeful, which in turn reinforces the positive actions you are taking. Achievable small steps build trust and momentum for working together.

#### **Step 8: Make mutually beneficial agreements**

After developing multiple options and prior to taking any doable next steps, agreements about how to proceed need to be negotiated. For agreements to be effective and enduring, everyone involved needs to feel a sense of equity; that everyone shares in the benefits and burdens equitably. Demands and strongly held points of view need to move toward compromise. No one can expect to get every one of his or her wishes fulfilled. During this

phase, the ground rule “Develop and use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed,” becomes paramount.

#### **Step 9: Revise and refine periodically**

People will frequently resist changing their stance on an issue if they feel that any new direction/solution can never be reversed or modified. Building into the conflict process a provision for reviewing the effectiveness of the implementation of any solution or agreement will help soften hard-core positions. Furthermore, allowing for modifications based on new data, or as a result of testing the effectiveness of any solution, is simply a good policy that will promote a vibrant and dynamic creative process. Most good ideas and solutions come about through an iterative process. No one hits the ball out of the park every time, much less, the first time.

Following these nine-steps will help you raise the bar on your team’s performance. Fostering an environment where navigating conflict effectively is the norm is a challenge no matter how experienced the leader is. The positive outcomes, however, are worth the effort. When people feel more confident at working through contentious issues, they will enjoy working more and will be more productive because they will be spending less emotional energy toward activities that are not productive, i.e., avoidance, backstabbing, and/or releasing pent up anger in tirades, etc. Positive emotional energy will then be more available for creative and productive activities and your workplace will be a more vibrant and inviting professional environment.