Anxiety and Conflict in Organizational life – What are the Costs?

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Conflict can be delicious to people in a perverse way. Some enjoy it. In one organization with whom I worked, an employee described the situation, "Our homeostasis has been to stay in conflict. We are like a boat that has been rocked by the storm for so long that the storm has become our norm. We seem to enjoy it. That is the only way we know to be together and function as an organization/community. We need some calm waters for a period of time." For some, conflict creates pseudo-relationships with allies against others (unhealthy triangles); for others it creates excitement; and for others, conflict is the way that they learned to relate from their family of origin. But conflict, when handled poorly, comes at tremendous costs to the parties and organizations as a whole—emotionally, physically, financially, and spirituality (morale).

Stuck inside a conflict, we may struggle to tally the costs, or we feel like the justification is worth the cost. But intentional work around tallying the cost can be helpful to the leader, the organization (profit and non-profit) and congregations.

When working with an organization, early on I have a conversation with the leaders, especially if one is the focus of the conflict and its anxiety. We discuss if they are interested in staying and would it be the best for the organization and the individual leader? If they think that they have had enough and have paid too much physically, emotionally and other ways and that they need to leave, then the conversation shifts to how they can prepare for the transition in integrity. If the cost has been too great, in most instances, I can see it in their eyes. As the leader and I talk, I am listening for how honest they are with themselves and with me. Some sample questions I am asking and listening into are:

- Are they clinging to self-justifying narratives?
- Is their focus on blame and fault-finding or learning, responsibility, finding solutions, and moving forward? What is their mindset?
- If they say they are ready to leave for the pain has been too great, then our conversation becomes, how do we have that conversation with other leaders and who needs to be part of it?
If they want to stay and believe staying is realistic and best for them and the organization's future, and I hear a fair assessment, we begin to explore:
- If they want to stay and believe staying is realistic and best for them and the organization's future, how do they lead through the current situation in a healthy,

responsible, mature manner? How do they regain trust if it was lost by some through the conflict? How do they nurture stability, compassion and hope again?

- How do they tend to themselves, the employees, and the organization as a whole learn, grow, and increase performance and well-being? What is the invitation in the situation?

Early in my career, I worked in an organization where there was a high level of conflict, disconnect, and anxiety. I was placed in a leadership position and as such, because of my position on some issues, I became part of the focus for the anxiety in the system. I remember sitting at a coffee house with my supervisor, who is now a friend. She said, "That situation is getting unwieldly and abusive. We need to get you out of there. It is not fair for you to have been placed in such a hopeless, turbulent situation." I paused and said, "As much as I want out, something in me knows that to leave is not the right thing to do at this time. I appreciate your concern, but I think for the good of the organization and my own well-being, I need to stay the course." If I left at that point, I would be running from something I feared, rather than toward a dream I thought possible that would help the organization. Hesitantly, my supervisor honored my request. From those years, my health paid for it and I could have done some things differently, but I learned and followed what I felt was the right thing to do. In time, the organization became a healthier, stronger, more collaborative team and in the years that followed moved from a place of challenge and pain to one filled with hope, trust, friendships, creativity, and most of all, positive results and high performance. For me, in that situation, staying was the right decision while being aware of the costs. As leaders, we have to heed not only the level of difficulty and the cost, but also a deeper voice or intuition—what is the right/best thing to do for oneself and the organization.

When I do interventions or caoching with organizations, I spend time with the appropriate leaders exploring the questions below. What is the cost?

Exercise: Here are some questions as you think about the costs:

1. How much time are you spending thinking about the conflict or the people in the conflict? (Some research has said that we spend on the average 25% to 30% of our time on conflict. My suspicion is that in these anxious times, that percentage is even higher.)
2. What has been the emotional and spiritual toll of the conflict? Has it affected your health? Your happiness? Your well-being? The way you see and relate to people, your team, and the organization?
3. What is the cost of the conflict to other significant people in your life? Your family? Your friends? Your co-workers or the larger community?
4. Has the conflict affected your ability to have peace of mind?
5. Has it taken a financial toll? What costs have been associated with the conflict?
6. How is the experience of the conflict informing or influencing your understanding of the organization (congregation)?
7. What are you learning from the situation in which you find yourself? What is the invitation? What changes do you need to make?

Assess Your Costs of Unhealthy Behavior, Conflict and Anxiety in the workplace:

- Wasted Time
- Lost Energy
- Lost Opportunity
- Wasted Money and other Resources
- Turnover/attrition with staff, team members, volunteers, visitors/clients, and members
- Cost emotionally, physically, and spirituality
- Other costs such as interpersonal relationships, team-work, and collaboration
- Total the Annualized Cost

What if you were able to recover 50% of that? What about 10% of that?

Agree or disagree, we invite you into the conversation!

(Note: Not all conflict is negative. Conflict, when handled in a healthy way, leads to high performing teams, collaboration, deepened relationship, positive change, success. When handled in an unhealthy manner, it leads to deep wounds, trauma and destruction. For high-performance teams dealing with conflict in healthy is critical. Costly conflict is a way of talking about conflict dealt with in an unhealthy or immature way.)

The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow human being is that I do not say what I mean, and I don't do what I say.

–Martin Buber