

Conflict can be a good thing!

By Dr. W. Craig Gilliam

The most intense conflicts, if overcome, leave behind a sense of security and calm that is not easily disturbed. It is just these intense conflicts and their conflagration which are needed to produce valuable and lasting results.

~~Carl Jung

*Four Rules for Life: Show up. Pay attention.
Tell the truth. Don't be attached to the results.*

~~ Angeles Arrien

*(*Note: This article uses organizations to refer to For-Profit and Not-For-Profit.)*

Have you ever thought that conflict could be good for your organization or team and an indicator of its overall health and well-being?

In his national best-selling book, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*, Patrick Lencioni reminds us that “Once organizational health is properly understood and placed into the right context, it will surpass all other disciplines in business as the greatest opportunity for improvement” (2012, p. 4). The way a team or organization deals with conflict and differences are key indicators of their health and vitality.

Because dealing with conflict and perceptions of threat, real or imagined, are deeply wired into our individual and collective psyches, to change those patterns takes awareness and intentional effort. Many of our behaviors evolve from what we learned in our family of origin, and while some of these patterns are helpful and healthy, others are not. Those patterns that are unhealthy, unconscious, and unresolved can be changed, rewired, or transformed. The way individuals, teams, or organizations deal with conflict are connected to these early, deep, primal patterns, for they are grounded in survival.

The good news is that individuals, teams, and organizations can be transformed through conflict or learn to deal with conflict and difference in healthy, constructive ways. I have seen individuals and teams move up on the scale of self-differentiation¹. They become healthier and more impacting in their community. I have experienced those individuals and organizations who have learned and embedded new ways to engage conflict well and allow it to invite them to a deeper way of being and performing. But I have also encountered leaders, teams, and organizations who do not engage conflict well; who either deny it and push conflict under the rug or become highly reactive, triggering a fight, flight or freeze reaction to situations.

In reaction to conflict, teams and organizations might obsessively avoid conflict and strive for harmony at all costs, which is rarely on the side of building high performing teams or healthier businesses. Avoidance is symptomatic. In Lencioni’s words, “The fear of conflict is almost always a sign of problems.” (2012, p. 38) Granted, timing, spirit, and context are critical in dealing with conflict, and in some situations, temporary avoidance can be a wise strategy. The phrase “obsessively avoiding conflict” is key and suggests that the time and context never arrive for individuals or teams to name the elephant in the room, deal openly and honestly with

¹ According to systems specialist, Murry Bowen, self-differentiation refers to a person’s capacity to define self, his or her own life’s goals and values, in the midst of other relationship systems. It includes the capacity to maintain a relatively non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious relationship systems and situations, to take maximum responsibility for one’s own destiny and emotional being. Self-differentiation means to be able to define self, staying calm and non-anxious, while staying in connection.

the issue(s), or have the courageous conversation. This type of avoidance can cripple teams and organizations—harmony at all costs.

At first glance, avoidance seems appropriate—even obvious. Who wouldn't want calmness instead of frustration, agreement instead of discord? But more often than not, what is needed when dealing with conflict is the courage to move past the appearance of harmony and peace. What might it look like to speak with the team about the problem (conflict) and struggle in a healthy way to find positive ways forward? In conflict work, we sometimes say, "The people are not the problem, the problem is the problem."

When leaders refuse to acknowledge or query about the problem, it communicates to the team a lack of confidence in their ability to handle the conflict or rise to the challenge. It is demeaning. Contrast this avoidance to a leader who openly acknowledges the problem and invites the question, "Team, how are we going to deal with this? What are our best options? Let's talk and find our way through this. What information do we need, how do we get it, and what are our next steps?"

In his book, *Managerial Courage*, Harvey Hornstein concluded from his research that seeking harmony in businesses, while worthy at times, is often a primary killer of innovation, initiative, and creativity. I would add that seeking harmony at all cost erodes trust and deep connections between and among people in organizations. He writes:

In an effort to achieve harmony, groups often homogenize individual behavior and opinion into undifferentiated, pale, inoffensive substance. In this way, consensus replaces diversity as a characteristic of the group's life. . . . Through a succession of concessions, prompted by the desire to avoid conflict and achieve harmony, each person yields a little so that the agreements which result are no one and everyone's. What often emerges under the pressure to get along, be nice and work and play well together is an uncontroversial package of rules about how to act and what to think, distinguished only by their blandness . . . Individual acts of managerial courage often require "breaking step with the troops." They challenge popular, established practices and familiar routines. Courageous initiatives frequently spark conflict, disrupting organizational harmony. Such conflict is one of the principal organizational benefits of managerial courage. When properly managed, conflict focuses on choices, aids commitment, elevates thinking and sharpens issues. Productive conflict, by continually juxtaposing organizational options, can be an enormous aid to organizational growth and progress. (1986, pp. 98 – 102)

In short, when leaders overlook, avoid, or even dismiss the intelligent edge of conflict, they find themselves allowing harmony to anesthetize their creative thinking, clear seeing, and skillful, generative action. Conflict can create chaos out of which clarity emerges.

In his book, *In Promise and Peril*, David Brubaker points out, "Some disagreement and conflict provides energy and generates ideas, but too much conflict becomes destructive. When an organization has too little conflict, it may need to be encouraged, and when an organization has too much conflict it may need to be reduced. In the middle of this curve, however, lies an optimal level of conflict where most organizations seem to thrive" (2009, p. 106).

I remember working with a conflicted group, and one of the leaders commented, "Our homeostasis is conflict. We are always in severe conflict; that seems to be how we relate. We are like a boat always in rough waters. We can't find the calm. What we need is new homeostasis or at least some time of peaceful waters to catch our breath and regroup."

Organizations and teams need a blend of chaos and calm, conflict and peace for health and to stay sharp and growing.

My son told me the following story of him and a group of associates at his work. The project they were given was high-risk and had to be completed.

The team was brought into a room together. The presenter of the project gave them the assignment, the deadline, offered the risk factors, then left the room, leaving the team to come up with a plan to carry out the project successfully. A lot was on the line.

The team began to struggle for the best plan. All in the room were high achievers, A-type personalities, and the tension was thick. People were arguing, debating, and suggesting ways forward. Even when the emotional heat was high and the temptation was to walk away, they stayed at it. Finally, in time, they agreed on the plan to execute.

The next day after they had finished, the supervisors brought them back together to debrief. My son said, "The first thing the supervisors said was that you're being frustrated, and the tensions high were expected. In fact, we would have been more concerned had you not had the tense engagements and debates, for the level of emotional engagement tells us that you are invested in the outcome; it suggests that you care." (The leader was normalizing the anxiety.)

The supervisor continued, "You are some of our brightest and best achievers. Anyone of you could have probably come up with a good plan or process that would work in this situation, but we believed that together, your plan would even be better. As you stated your ideas and were challenged by each other, it made you rethink your own stance. As you talked and argued, a "third other" idea began to emerge that was better than any of the original ones coming from you by yourself. The metal was sharpening metal. The collective wisdom is greater than the thoughts of one in many instances.

Our greatest concern was not conflict, anxiety, and disequilibrium. Those are natural when you are honest, engaged, and care. Granted, we have to be responsible in how we express our feelings and respond to others. Seeing how deeply you all cared and wanted to succeed is something on which we knew we could build."

The supervisor commented that the greatest concern was that "after you decided your path, would you support each other on the decisions and continue to adapt to the changing phenomenon as it arises? What we saw was that you would. Once you agreed and worked through it, you were a team."

The team left that experience closer, wiser, and with a deeper trust in themselves, one another, and the whole than how they entered. This growth happened because of the courage they had to stay at the table, speak their insights, honor differences, and see the project through. They experienced as the leadership guru Warren Bennis stated, "We can have unity without conformity" (*Leading Change*, James O'Toole, p. 49, 1996).

This story offers an example of a team who was willing to risk superficial harmony for deeper, bolder, more courageous outcomes, intentions, and relationships. They believed that the answers they were seeking were already within their midst. They offered what they could and asked for what they needed. They trusted the container was strong enough to hold as what

needed to happen emerged. Variety and multiplicity were invited, and the team got to where they needed to get to move forward.

Avoiding conflict can produce a harmony of sorts, but not without costs. Being predictably polite and avoiding respectful but honest conversations is like artificial flowers being placed in a vase or wearing a clip-on tie to a formal event. Teams buy into a phony sense of prettiness and relief. Authenticity and genuineness are lost. They settle for comfort and being free from irritation rather than risking soulful engagement and transformational encounters.

Over time, the complacency lulls teams and organizations to sleep. They become increasingly willing to ignore what needs their attention and avoid saying what needs to be said. Honest relationships become lost, unhealthy triangles anesthetize, and secrets become the norm.

When we find the courage to create a culture where conflict is accepted and can be handled with dignity and respect, the team discovers that having an edge is an asset. The edge that conflict can bring reveals a fearless, courageous harmony—a spacious kind of joy and dignity arising out of hard work, respectful candor, and belief in the team and its wisdom.

This fearless harmony and courageous way of being together are about appreciating and living the human edge—the richness that grows out of diversity when the “I” and “we” interact. To live here invites leaders and teams to engage in ironies, complexities, paradoxes, and conflict, and attend to what needs attention whether harmonious or volatile. As leaders and teams, the task is to speak skillfully, listen deeply to what is being said and what remains unsaid, and to encourage what is healthy, mature, responsible and inspiring, to attend to the next evolution trying to occur.

Creating and living in a culture that engages conflict well reminds us that living is not about being free from tension, anxiety, diversity, complexity, and conflict, but about being free to live life fully and to engage deeply in it.

In the in-betweenness of our deep engagements, life happens. Our better selves meet and develop in these spaces—a soulful way of variety, complexity and multiplicity, not just unity and harmony. As a result, the organization thrives, diversity is nurtured, teams perform at a higher level, and productivity rises.

*Whoever said that strife was nice,
only that we need fire
as much as ice.
These energies
need the space to flow;
too closed to either
and all explode.*

Agree or disagree, you are invited into the conversation.



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