BY
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Turning negative conflict into a positive conversation

Sean McLoughney looks at how we can embrace conflict by using a 3-step approach to structure and deal with difficult situations.

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Theodore Roosevelt once declared that "the most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people". For me, this quote puts dealing with people in perspective. Developing a solid working relationship with people you like or admire is relatively easy. You are more forgiving of their quirky habits or annoying mistakes. However, throughout our careers we will have to work with people we don't like or find hard to work with; as professionals we must develop our skills to deal with these situations.

Your ability to work and get along with all types of people also impacts your career progression. When I look at potential managers one key area that I focus on is their ability to deal with people professionally. How do they get the best performance out of people? How do they inspire people? How do they deal with challenging conflict situations or difficult people? Dealing with conflict is a great test for managers and potential managers. Do they make the situation worse, avoid it by running away or do they deal with the situation skilfully? Getting along with people isn't about being friends with everyone, it is about working with people in a professional manner.

There is a tendency to view all conflict as bad; that if someone is causing conflict in the team, you must get rid of the troublemaker before they ruin the entire team. Conflict is seen as time consuming, a major cause of stress and something that most people would avoid. Negative conflict will deflect attention away from important issues and use up already stretched resources.

However, not all conflict is destructive. In lots of ways having no conflict within your team can be as bad for business as negative conflict. Conflict that is managed effectively can be beneficial. It encourages people to debate issues robustly, to view things from different perspectives and it reduces the negative impact of 'group think'. Managed conflict can generate new ideas, reduce the risks of mistakes and build a collaborative approach to problem solving.

Turning negative conflict into a positive outcome is a skill that people can develop over time. Disruptive conflict is a part of the working environment, it happens. It is our reaction to the conflict that will significantly impact the outcome. We can, through our actions, either fuel the flames of the conflict or reach an agreement to move forward with a solution that everyone can live with.

Managing disruptive conflict can be achieved by taking a 3-step approach – the 3Es;

Establish **Explore** **Explain**
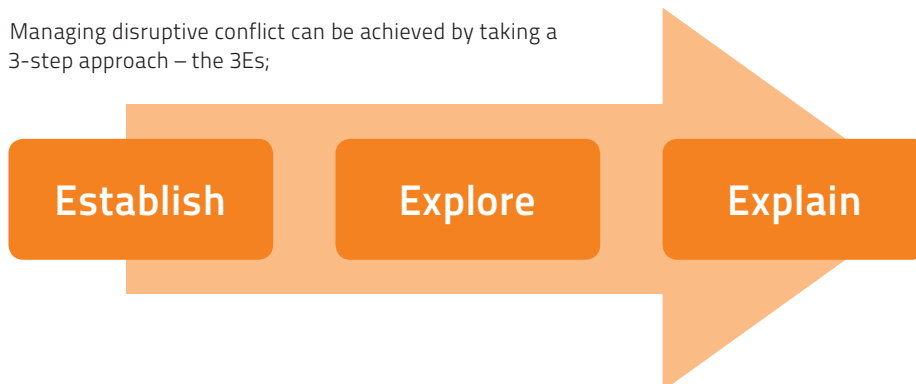
Establish the facts

Often during this part of the process there will be differing views on what the conflict is actually about. Emotions can be high and people are rarely listening to each other. They are upset and want their side of the story to be heard. Because communication is at the heart of so much conflict in the workplace it is essential that this step is about defining what is the conflict, what's the dispute. Refrain at this stage from saying anything that might make the situation worse. Avoid any action or comments that might seem defensive. You should be in total active listening mode.

Focus your attention on establishing all the facts, no assumptions. Ask the person to explain the situation from their point of view. If there is a third party involved talk to them rather than accept someone else's version. Get agreement on the facts of the situation; this can take time as people may dispute the facts at first. Move from a blame culture to an ownership and responsibility culture because too much time is wasted deciding on whose fault it was. Blame culture invites a defensive position from people and rarely helps those involved to move forward and find a workable solution.

You cannot move to a resolution until the problem has been clearly described. Once all the facts have been gathered and the problem defined then summarise the facts back to the person. By doing this you are ensuring that there was no misunderstanding and the other person will feel that they have been listened to. This stage is about defining the problem.

Explore the reality

One reason why some managers find it hard to deal with conflicts is that they are fixers. They like to fix things through quick answers and often lack the patience to explore further and identify the real causes of the conflict. When they are confronted with a problem they will look for the quickest solution. Consequently, the problem will often resurface a week or two later. For example, if a report is given to you late, you need to establish why it is late rather than telling the person to speed up and in future have it completed on time. Dealing with the 'why' will be the key to solving the problem long term.

Resolving a conflict requires you to establish the root cause of the problem and build a solution when you understand the full picture. Skilled conflict negotiators will empathise with the person. They seek to understand the situation without bias and they take the emotion out of the situation as emotion fuels negative conflict.

Explore the reality of the situation through great questions, don't accept that all the facts are valid. Challenging the persons view of the situation will ensure you solve the real problem. Management guru, Peter Drucker believes that "the important and difficult job is never to find the right answers, it is to find the right questions." This is the most demanding part of the process as poorly judged questions can make the situation worse. Choose your questions carefully as you are now gathering information at a deeper level. In our example you might ask: what was the biggest challenge in writing the report? What support did you get from the sales department? What do you need to happen so that the report will be on time next month? Asking these types of questions helps you to move away from the issue of the report being late towards identifying the root cause of the problem.

During this probing stage acknowledge points that both sides agree on. Explore this a little further and highlight the benefits of these points. It is a good tactic to emphasise these areas of agreement as it shows that both parties agree on things and with a little effort they can move forward.

This stage is about bringing clarity to the problem and ensuring that you solve the real issue rather than the perceived problem.

Explain the options

Now that all parties understand the conflict from everyone's point of view it is time to turn your attention to finding a workable solution. Discuss the impact the conflict is having on those involved and the need to find a solution. This stage is all about the future. You cannot change the past so focus on a successful outcome.

Explain the options available and agree on the actions that can be taken so that everyone can move forward. Put a timescale on these actions. Explain that you will check-in with all parties to ensure that the actions are working. Finish the conversation by repeating the agreed course of action so that there are no misunderstandings.

It is important that dealing with a conflict situation isn't seen as a one-off discussion, that the problem is solved immediately. You may need to re-evaluate the situation from time to time and make some further adjustments so that the problem won't resurface again later.

Once the problem has been successfully dealt with you should acknowledge the great work done by everyone to move forward. This will build team collaboration and become one of the 'ways of working' for the team.

Conclusion

Embrace conflict as it will help develop a core skill that can be used in lots of different situations. Use the 3-step approach to give yourself some structure when dealing with difficult problems. Remember to establish all the facts, explore further so that you solve the real issue and explain what action needs to be taken to move forward.