Changing the culture of conflict

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Tania Coke thinks a little conflict can be a good thing.

A new vision of organisational conflict is emerging. In this vision, conflict is no longer seen as a destructive force, destined to drag down morale, productivity and profits. Instead, conflict becomes an opportunity for learning and growth, which can increase creativity and boost motivation and performance.

For this to happen, things need to change. Change is needed not only at the level of the individual, but also at the level of the organisation. It's all very well changing the fish but, for lasting results, the water in the fish-tank also needs a change. Here are the steps you can take to bring this vision of constructive conflict to life.

The healthy conflict organisation

Imagine if, whenever anyone contradicted or criticised you, you replied: 'How interesting! Tell me more about what you think and why.' And having heard them out in full, you then offered a full account of your own perspective. Now imagine that everyone in your organisation had this kind of conversation whenever conflict arose.

This is what I call the *healthy conflict organisation*. In it, situations which might normally lead to relationship break-downs, reduced motivation, dwindling productivity and profit, in fact lead in the opposite direction.

As a result of the kind of conversation described above, relationships become deeper and stronger. Personal motivation, self-awareness and creativity all rise. Financially, the organisation benefits too.

What would an organisation need to do to bring about this vision of conflict?

Learn from conflict

This vision is only possible if the people in the organisation are equipped with certain values and skills. Since our prevailing education system and social norms do not promote these values and skills, the organisation would need to provide appropriate training.

Through this training, employees would learn how to listen deeply to perspectives that contradict their own, and to express their own perspectives honestly and respectfully even in the face of opposition. Role-play exercises in particular can help to normalise the new approach to conflict and promote a culture of openness in which conflict is viewed as something to be explored, not avoided.

Align communications and processes

The conditions for constructive conflict also need to be built into the written communications of the organisation. Brochures, websites, newsletters, recruitment criteria, performance evaluation forms and all other documentation need to be consistent with the new values.

Even business pitches and proposals should reflect a desire to understand the clients' perspectives, express one's own and creatively address the differences. The same holds for the organisation's processes, in particular those governing conflict.

Employees who find themselves embroiled in destructive conflicts should be offered support from conflict experts who can help them to communicate openly and honestly with one another through mediation or other forms of facilitated conversations.
In situations where people in conflict are unwilling or unready to talk to one another directly, conflict coaching can be offered instead. Through one-on-one sessions with a trained conflict coach, people can gain new insights about themselves and their situations which can reverse the downward spiral of destructive conflict.

A new kind of leadership

But the new approach will never stick unless prominent figures in the organisation are on board. The way the CEO behaves in internal meetings, shareholder meetings and public events sets the tone for communication standards throughout the organisation.

The same applies to leaders at all levels of the organisation. In the typical organisation today, performance, outcomes and profits are prioritised over people and relationships. Team leaders act as if they are too busy to waste time talking about how people are getting on with one another.

But in the healthy conflict organisation, team leaders are aware of the potential costs of avoiding conflict and of the benefits of constructive conflict management. As a result, during team meetings and one-to-ones, the leader creates space for team members to explore differences of agreement and personality clashes, in the name of learning and growth.

The wellbeing of those within the organisation are treated as a priority and leaders take the responsibility of looking after their staff members seriously.

Transforming attitudes to conflict

Ultimately, what is required is a change in the way people think. The values and priorities of people across the organisation need to shift.

Instead of focusing only on measurable factors, such as units of production, number of hours worked and financial indicators, people genuinely need to value intangible elements, such as self-awareness, quality of relationships and mental health. Once these values have taken root in the organisation, the behaviours will follow suit.

Those responsible for handling conflict have a particular responsibility to embrace healthy conflict values. In their dealings with employees in conflict, they need to role-model the new approach. Everything they say and do must portray conflict as an opportunity to be explored and not an evil to be avoided.

They need the self-awareness to see when they are imposing their own agenda on other people's conflicts. They need the humility to accept that they do not always know what is best for other people. They need the creativity and openness to address each conflict and each person as unique.

What is the organisation for?

Fundamentally, the organisation's approach to conflict resolution is tied to the purpose of the organisation. If the organisation exists to make profit, then the chances of building a culture of healthy conflict are slim.

Training and processes can be put in place, but the culture will not change until human value is prioritised over economic value. In the healthy conflict organisation, people must be valued in their own right, not just as economic inputs.

When this happens, values, behaviours, processes and communications will shift – however slowly – and the organisation can expect to achieve a culture of healthy conflict where both humans and profits will flourish.