



Creative Leadership: 3 Ways To Turn Tension Into Growth

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 24 July 2025

In today's fast-paced and uncertain business landscape, growth and innovation are high on the agenda of many leaders. According to PwC's UK CEO Survey 2025, 66% of UK CEOs are actively developing new business capabilities or operating models in pursuit of growth. To unlock that growth, leaders must cultivate creative leadership. This means building an organizational culture where staff feel comfortable challenging the status quo and where debate and healthy disagreement are encouraged. A creative leader understands that managing this tension and difference – in other words, managing conflict – is at the heart of a successful innovation strategy.

1. Reframe conflict as an opportunity

In many workplaces, disagreement and discord are seen as a 'nuisance' that use up valuable time on the path to getting things done. As such, busy leaders can dismiss challenges, curtail debate, or ignore conflict in the hope it will go away. But this avoidance mechanism can backfire, as issues are likely to fester and escalate, and subsequently take up a lot of time and resource to manage.

When conflict is viewed as potentially constructive, it can spark new ideas and lead to better ways of working. It can also bring a greater understanding of colleagues and strengthen team relationships. In a team built on trust, where people feel safe challenging each other respectfully, conflict becomes a normal part of working life. When team members are aware and comfortable with each other's differences, they are more likely to embrace a wide variety of opinions and experiences, and see this as a possibility to work better together. A creative leader sees the opportunity in conflict, not just the cost.

2. Build everyday conflict communication skills

It's tempting to think of conflict resolution as a niche set of skills for complex interpersonal issues. Yet these skills are foundational and can be used to transform everyday conversations and nurture creativity. Although these skills are often easy to understand in theory, they are much more challenging to apply in practice. For example, listening skills are widely accepted as a core management competency, but deep listening techniques, such as listening for repetition, intentions, and expectations, take time to master. Listening well also requires the underrated skill of being comfortable with silence, which leaves more space for others to express themselves.

Perspective-taking is equally vital. By encouraging a diverse range of perspectives, a creative leader ensures discussions are inclusive of all views. To benefit from viewpoint diversity, team members need to feel safe to speak up and share their opinions without fear of repercussions. For innovation to flourish, a leader may also seek wider perspectives from people across functions, as well as different stakeholder groups.

3. Empower others to take responsibility

Creative leadership isn't about solving every problem or having all the answers. The leader's role is that of a facilitator, helping others take responsibility and fostering a culture of accountability around conflict. By doing so, people develop their own skills and resilience in navigating tension. They are also more likely to come up with creative solutions to an issue if they have constructed the way forward themselves.

Importantly, leaders who are willing to share their own experiences of difficult situations and personal challenges set a tone of humility. They help team members to connect with them in a more human way. Mistakes or missteps are shared and framed as learning opportunities. This enables learning across the organization and role-models the idea of a perpetual learner, someone who seeks to develop their practice so they can better anticipate, manage, and learn from conflict.

A creative leader is more than a conflict-competent leader; they recognize that when managed well, conflict can be a powerful driver of insight, growth, and collaborative relationships. By looking for opportunities to work with tension, then utilizing conflict management skills and sharing a learning approach, a creative leader doesn't 'lead' from the front, but leads with others and achieves breakthrough change, even in unpredictable times.