



## Turning Boardroom Conflict into Support

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The world feels increasingly complex, and the corporate boardroom is no exception to this. For business leaders, this translates into navigating competing priorities and opposing viewpoints with fellow executives, including the CEO. People seem less able to listen to perspectives different to their own and more attached to their ways of perceiving the world. It is in these conditions that the ability of leaders to act as role models for respectful disagreement in the boardroom is essential.

### **Reframing boardroom conflict as normal and necessary**

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of boardroom dynamics. Where executives work closely together, differences of opinion are bound to arise. For many people, conflict continues to carry a negative connotation, viewed as a sign of failure or dysfunction – something to avoid rather than address. This often stems from a lack of confidence, understanding or training.

Yet when issues are ignored, they tend to grow. Unspoken frustration can erode trust and cooperation with fellow Board members, leading to lower productivity and wellbeing. Minor disagreements may escalate, demand HR intervention and impact the whole Board. It is therefore important to manage tensions early, when dialogue is still possible.

### **When managed well, conflict builds stronger executive teams**

Despite its reputation, a degree of healthy boardroom conflict can be a powerful force for progress. Differences of opinion can spark creativity. Honest conversations can help uncover blind spots. Diverse ways of thinking can challenge assumptions, which leads to better decision-making and innovation.

When executives feel safe to express disagreement without fear of judgement or repercussion, trust deepens. This sense of psychological safety encourages people to take risks and fosters curiosity and creativity. If the CEO can help create a culture that welcomes respectful debate, this can solve problems faster and prevent many from arising.

CEOs themselves can set the tone by showing that different viewpoints are not a threat but an opportunity for growth. Instead of assuming that dissent stems from negativity, strong leaders recognise that even critical feedback offers valuable insights. When everyone agrees without question, creativity stalls and organisations miss the chance to adapt and evolve.

### **The language of respectful disagreement**

One simple and effective tool for managing conflict in the boardroom lies in how we use tone and language. Phrases that start with, “I believe...” or “I feel...” communicate personal perspective rather than accusation, and keep the conversation grounded in mutual respect. They invite others to share their views rather than defend themselves.

Equally important are curiosity and open-mindedness. When leaders approach a disagreement with genuine interest – by asking, “Can you help me understand your thinking?” – they signal a willingness to listen and understand. This diffuses tension and models a culture that fosters wider boardroom collaboration.

### **Reflecting on how leaders respond**

Self-reflection and self-awareness are also key to effective boardroom management. After a disagreement, board members should ask themselves: “Did I help to clarify or inflame the situation? Did the conversation lead to better understanding?” This essential leadership quality prevents emotional reactions from overshadowing calm and reasoned responses.

When leaders pause to examine their own triggers, they can catch unhelpful patterns in their own behaviours early. For instance, do they tend to avoid confrontation altogether? Or do they respond too quickly in defence of their position? When we recognise these tendencies, we allow ourselves to steer discussions more calmly and productively, which will turn potential flashpoints into opportunities for greater understanding and growth.

### **Building organisational confidence in conflict**

To harness the positive potential in boardroom conflict, executives need to create environments where these skills are developed and supported. Leadership and management development courses need to include practical and experiential training in conflict management skills, both in theory and practice. Providing simple tools and frameworks gives board members the confidence to address issues early and informally.

### **The ripple effect of positive conflict**

Ultimately, positive conflict management begins at the top, and the boardroom is no exception. Leaders who demonstrate humility, curiosity and openness set the tone for the entire organisation. When board members – and, indeed, employees at all levels – see that their opinions are genuinely valued, they are more likely to engage, collaborate and contribute innovative ideas.

By reframing boardroom conflict as a source of opportunity, organisations can transform tension into momentum. Healthy and respectful disagreement drives learning, strengthens the relationships with everyone – from the CEO down – and builds resilience. In a world that feels increasingly divided, leaders who navigate conflict with empathy and integrity will sustain harmony, and inspire the creativity and trust that power long-term boardroom and organisational success.