

The Power of a Good Fight

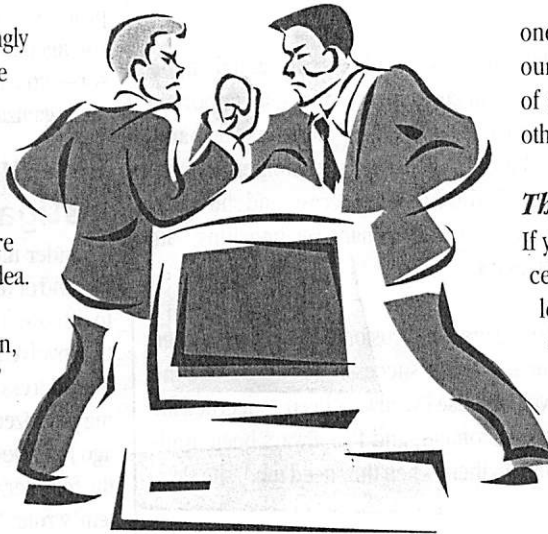
How To Manage Conflict, Confrontation and Consensus in the Workplace

By Lynne Eisaguirre

The scene was becoming increasingly familiar to me: six warring Vice Presidents and their beleaguered CEO gathered around a table. The current battle arose over the direction of the business, but it could have been anything. They'd reached the stage where fighting just to fight seemed like a good idea.

Because two of the officers were women, I'd been brought in to help "sensitize" the men. After talking with each officer individually, I reached a conclusion that surprised the CEO. Although there certainly were some diversity issues, the underlying problem was the way the individuals and the group approached *conflict and decision making*. Different members of the group used different conflict resolution styles: some avoided conflict, some relished fighting, others triangulated conflict. (They favored talking with someone other than the person with whom they had conflict.) All of the individuals lacked conflict resolution and consensus-building skills.

If you're going to be viewed as a strategic business partner in your organization—rather than a dinosaur—you must develop your own conflict resolution skills and develop a reputation for leadership in conflict resolution and consensus building. Since many professionals choose sales because they like people, or because they have good "people skills," many seem to view conflict as the enemy. I constantly hear my clients complain about wanting to move to a job where there is "less conflict" or where "things are less political."



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Conflict Can Foster Creativity

My experience is that conflict-free organizations are rare. Even if you do find one, an apparently calm organization may not deliver on the professional's true needs. Conflict—skillfully resolved—tends to develop more creative and vibrant organizations. As Jim Autry, former President of Meridith Corp., emphasizes: “If you think managing conflict and managing diversity are loaded with problems, then you haven't thought through the problems of managing sameness. I'd far rather be faced with trying to achieve harmony and goodwill among people who are at

one another's throat than to try to square an ounce of innovation or creativity or risk out of a company full of photocopies of each other.”

The Avoider

If you want to change the way you are perceived in your organization, start assuming leadership in teaching and modeling conflict resolution and consensus-building skills. In order to succeed, you must first examine your own view of conflict. Do you avoid conflict and therefore, allow disagreements to fester? Be careful—this is your personal conflict resolution style. Conflicts can devolve into a *negative spiral of conflict*. When we reach the bottom of the spiral, some important psychological changes occur: we're unable to see the opposing party or parties clearly; our perceptions of the others will be clouded; we'll suspect every action, no matter how innocent. What's significant about this change is that we don't even realize that this is happening. We'll continue to insist that we see the situation accurately. At that point, conflict is difficult to resolve and frequently results in litigation or violence—expensive and tragic outcomes.

The Pit Bull

Other conflict resolution styles include an aggressive, what I call “pit-bull” style. This style may result in temporary victories, but damages the relationship and the organization over time because it does not meet the *needs and interests* of the parties involved. Even if people submit to the will of the pit bull, there may be foot-dragging, time-wasting and perhaps even sabotage.

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Superstar - Andrey Lubchenko...

Lubchenko, who came to the United States just six years ago, acknowledges that he really doesn't care much for cold calling, but does find it challenging and often rewarding. "It can be pretty frustrating at times, but it's just a numbers game," he explains. "You hear 'no' a lot. But for every 'no', you know you're getting that much closer to getting a 'yes' from someone."

He attributes some of his success at sales—especially cold calling—to a friendly personality and an ability to converse with potential clients about something that they all enjoy talking about—their business. "You have to show them that you are really interested in what they do and be able to talk about it with them," he explains. "Most people really don't care what you do, but they do care a great deal about what they do."

Lubchenko says he's not bothered much by not being totally familiar with a company's business when he makes an unannounced call. "You can see what they do when you walk in their door, and then, you only need to get them to talk about it," he says.

Such conversation, he adds, eventually gives him an opening to turn the discussion to the service and products he sells. "Guess what, I can save you some money," is what he says he usually tells them. And, he adds, a sale often follows.

While Christian is delighted to have Lubchenko on his sales team, he does confess to one frustration that he has with him. "I've been trying to get Andrey to share some of his techniques and secrets with others, but so far he's been pretty reluctant to do so," he says. ■

Superstar - Joyce Peters...

them use to operate their bankcard systems. "She is very skillful in assisting merchants with complicated technical solutions," he says, including merging merchants' personalized systems with the broader systems used by banks, processors and major card companies such as Visa USA and MasterCard International.

Plus, he says, she places substantial importance on customer relations, an important service that most large merchants demand. "She's one of the most customer-oriented people you could run across, and she works very hard at merchant relationships," he stresses.

For Peters, good customer relations has been the key to her success. "I believe I've done well because I've always been concerned for my customers, and I've always been available to them when they need me," she says.

She notes that many sales persons in the bankcard industry sign-up major merchants, turn them over to operations or customer service people, and then go on to the next sale. However, because the needs of the larger merchants are generally much different than other types of merchants, operations people often are not fully equipped to deal with them and their problems.

Peters says she works a little differently than most. "I always stay with them, and I'm always available to them. When they have a problem, they can call me. That might not be the right way to do things, but it's my way," she says.

And, she adds, her strategy seems to be working rather well. Not only does she continue to land the big clients, but she's managed to hold on to most of them, some for as long as 10 years. "I must be doing something right," she says. ■

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If you triangulate conflict, you may need to learn to talk directly to the person with whom you have the problem, rather than others. Complaining to third parties about the conflict results in what I call *triangulation strangulation*, describing how the conflict process is strangled rather than resolved. If you need to ventilate, choose a trusted advisor—coach, counselor or priest—outside the organization.

**Resolving Conflict
Instigates Invention**

Consider the possibility of welcoming conflict and developing a balanced approach. Try to discover the needs and interests of all parties involved and invest in creative solutions that address those needs rather than becoming polarized on positions. A hundred years ago John Dewey, the great thinker, writer and the founder of our modern educational system, wrote: "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving...Conflict is a *sine quo non* of reflection and ingenuity."

Learning to work skillfully with conflict and to encourage both conflict resolution and consensus-building skills in your organization will help move you into leadership as a strategic business partner in your organization and not a dinosaur.

"In a culture that tends to leave the resolution of conflict to lawyers and law enforcement officers, few people have experienced the rewards that can come from working openly and skillfully with disagreements."

—Carolyn R. Shaffer
& Kristin Anundsen

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