A Systematic Approach to Creative Conflict Management
by
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WHAT IS A PRODUCTIVE DISPUTE?

When you're in the trenches during a conflict, how do you know if it's a good fight or a bad fight? Productive conflicts—what I call "good fights"—share several overarching characteristics: they honor the value of conflict; they are open, not masked; they concern ideas, not personalities; and they involve the skillful expression and management of emotion.

Why do we want to generate productive conflict? Research demonstrates that organizations with constructive conflicts are more creative, productive and innovative—qualities every organization needs in today's competitive environment. Harvard researchers, for example, found that executives with high tech companies who engaged in productive disputes generated more innovation and productivity than those with low levels of conflict.[1] A plethora of additional research has come to the same conclusion.

Generating good fights starts with attitudes that value conflict. Professor Linda L. Putnam summarizes her research on conflict and that of others, stating that within organizations, a good fight "balances power relationships, promotes flexibility and adaptiveness, and prevents stagnation of work units."[2]

Once we realize the value of productive conflict, the question then becomes, how do we create organizations that incubate good fights and discourage destructive disputes? This article will address the systems we need to create; the role of the leader in creative conflict; collective mission statements, goals and values; the training needed to produce creative conflict management; and additional organizational tactics.

CREATING A MISSION AND VALUES AROUND CREATIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Most organizations now have some kind of mission statement. If thoughtfully created, these statements can help organizations achieve their goals and create a powerful culture. Consider including conflict management as a part of your organization's mission.

For example, a large transportation district crafted the following addition about conflict to their general mission statement. You can see it also intersects well with the organization's union contract.

Goals Statement for Conflict Resolution

The Transportation District, as an organization, recognizes that conflict is a normal and predictable part of working together. Therefore, we adopt the following goals relating to conflict resolution:

1. We are committed to increasing our skills in resolving conflict.
2. At all levels of the organization, we strive to resolve conflicts in a productive and creative way, without threats, harassment or violence.
3. Nothing in this goal statement is meant to conflict with the Collective Bargaining Agreement or other policies.

Section 1: Management-Union Relations

The Employer agrees to meet in good faith with the duly elected representatives of the Union and attempt to resolve all questions arising between them. The Union fully agrees that within its ability each of its members shall render faithful service in their respective positions as outlined in the classes of this Agreement and will cooperate with the management of the Employer in the efficient operation of the system in accordance with the rules, regulations and operating conditions as announced by the Employer, and will cooperate and assist in fostering cordial relations between the Employer and the public.

The district combined elements from their usual mission statement with the mission statement on conflict. They also included a statement about their goals for labor/management relations since they were a unionized organization. You can see the parallels between the two statements. Reprinting these two together helped the organization create a dialogue with the union around the issue of conflict *before* they faced their next issue.

What is the mission of your organization? What are its goals? How would it help your organization reach its goals if you included your mission for conflict resolution?

One of the most powerful statements is to emphasize that you recognize, as a group, that conflict is a part of life, can be valuable, and that it's your goal to

skillfully manage conflict. This can serve as a revelation to those in your organization who are constantly frustrated by the very existence of conflict. They need to know that their leaders understand conflict is normal and healthy. Yet, leaders also need to make it clear that *skillful* and creative conflict management is something they consider a part of everyone's job description. Just making these statements and serving as role models for their enactment can help to resolve many problems around conflict.

FOSTERING A CREATIVE CULTURE
Of course, one purpose of productive conflict is to incubate more creativity in your culture. What other organizational characteristics encourage a creative and conflict-positive culture? A group of creativity researchers[3] used the Department of Labor's classification of the characteristics of U.S. organizations to determine what organizational values led to innovation, and identified four factors:

1. People orientation, such as collaboration, supportiveness, and team orientation
2. Risk taking, such as a willingness to experiment and aggressiveness
3. Attention to detail, such as precision and results orientation
4. Stability, such as security of employment

These results suggest an organizational culture that supports risk taking, collaboration, quality, and security is likely to be innovative and "high performance." They also found using teams and information sharing led to higher levels of group interaction and fostered creative decision-making. Organizations with these characteristics in their culture will be most able to generate good fights and the resulting innovation.

Perhaps one of the most critical components of fostering a creative culture is encouraging risk-taking. How do you encourage reasonable risk? Dick Liebhaber, executive vice president of MCI, has observed, "We do not shoot people who make mistakes. We shoot people who do not take risks." [4]

Organizational norms, top management walking the talk, and managers encouraging risk, help encourage creative risk-taking. Without encouraging risks, it's difficult for anything creative to emerge. Researcher Amy Edmonson,[5] for example, studied the effects of "psychological safety" in a large number of teams in an office furniture manufacturing company. Psychological safety "is characterized by a shared belief that well-intentioned action will not lead to punishment or rejection." She measured safety with a survey instrument that

included statements such as "it is safe to take a risk on this team." Edmonson found the level of psychological safety felt by team members affected learning behavior and led to higher team performance. She also found that team leadership needed to create the climate for risk-taking that led to enhanced performance.

Leaders must also be careful how they respond to failure in order to encourage risks. A superintendent at Chaparral Steel, for example, championed a $1.5 million arch saw for trimming finished steel beams. When he brought the saw back to the site, the tool failed. After a year of unsuccessful tinkering, the saw was replaced. The superintendent was promoted to vice president of operations, surprising outsiders who "can't believe you can make a mistake like that and not get crucified."[6]

Leaders can learn to deliver honest feedback in a way that encourages creativity and risk-taking. Alan Horn, for example, chairman and CEO of Castle Rock Entertainment, is careful when first presented with creative ideas such as screenplays or ideas for marketing. He tries to cultivate a "heartfelt, internalized respect for what these people do." When they present a new idea:

> I want to remember that they are *completely* vulnerable at that moment. My job is not to kill them but to find the bright, creative, special parts of their proposal and focus on those first, to ease their anxiety, make them feel less vulnerable. Then I have to find a graceful way into the parts of what they've brought that need improving.[7]

Feedback delivered in this way helps create a culture that welcomes risk-taking and innovation. Such a culture helps incubate productive conflict.

CONNECTIVITY AND CONFLICT
Nurturing connectivity is also critical to fostering a culture of creative conflict. For example, one CEO of a high-tech company makes it a point to wander through his various groups of developers to look for ways in which different programming research can be shared in new and innovative ways.

Other companies foster connectivity through the web by creating sites related to specific projects and making sure that workers around the world can access the site to share and learn.

ADDITIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL TACTICS

The research on creative conflict confirms a strong culture organized around clear purpose helps lead to conflict-skilled organization. Nurturing risk-taking and connectivity also helps. In addition, researchers Kathleen Eisenhardt, Jean Kahwajy, and L. J. Bourgeois, III, reporting on their findings in the *Harvard Business Review*,[8] identified five other cultural tactics that helped companies skillfully manage conflict to drive creativity and productivity. The successful teams were able to separate the person from the problem, disagree over strategy significance, and still get along with one another. The tactics were:

- They worked with more information and debated on the facts.
- They developed multiple solutions to raise the level of debate.
- They injected humor into decision-making
- They maintained a balance of power.
- They used a fallback instead of a true consensus.

Let's look at how successful teams used all of these factors.

FOCUS ON THE FACTS
The researchers found more information is better because it encourages people to focus on issues, not personalities. Companies who skillfully managed conflict claimed to "measure everything," including facts about the external environment. As one CEO explained his process, "we over-MBA it." Otherwise, teams waste time in pointless debate over opinions and biases. Without timely and accurate information, people rather than issues become the focus, creating interpersonal conflict. Managers with high degrees of interpersonal conflict rely more on "hunches and guesses" than on current information.

The researchers found "a direct link between reliance on facts and low levels of interpersonal conflict." With facts, people moved swiftly to the central issues. In the absence of facts, people instead suspect others' motives. "Building decisions on facts creates a culture that emphasizes issues instead of personalities."

MULTIPLE ALTERNATIVES
Sometimes leaders assume they reduce conflict by focusing on only one or two alternatives in order to minimize the possible disagreements. Yet the researchers found that teams with low interpersonal conflict do just the opposite. They purposefully float multiple alternatives, sometimes even suggesting options with which they disagree, just to promote debate.

Considering multiple alternatives lowers bad fights and increases good ones, because it diffuses conflict, choices become less black and white, and people can more easily shift positions. More creative options emerge, sometimes taking part of several different solutions. The process itself becomes more creative and enjoyable—people focus more on the problem instead of on personalities.

THE POWER OF HUMOR
The researchers found teams that handle conflict well make explicit and often contrived attempts to relieve tension and promote collaboration. They find competition exciting. In the teams with unhealthy interpersonal conflict, humor was absent.

The successful teams used humor as a healthy defense mechanism to protect people from the stress that arises in the course of making strategic decisions. The humor also put people in a more positive mood. Many researchers have found that people in a positive mood tend to be not only more optimistic, but also more forgiving of others and more creative.

BALANCED POWER STRUCTURES
Organizations with autocratic leaders as well as organizations with extremely weak leaders both generated high levels of unhealthy interpersonal conflict. The lowest level of destructive conflict comes from teams with balanced power structures in which the CEO is the most powerful, but the other members of management wield substantial power in their own areas of responsibility.

QUALIFIED CONSENUS
The most successful teams didn't seek true consensus all the time. Instead, they used a kind of *fall back* or *qualified consensus*. The group talked and tried to reach consensus. If they couldn't within a relevant period of time, the most senior leader made the decision. Remarkably, the teams that insisted on resolving substantive conflict by forcing consensus displayed the unhealthiest interpersonal conflict. Insisting on consensus in all issues leads to "endless haggling."

As one VP of engineering put it: "Consensus means that everyone has veto power. Our products were too late and they were too expensive." What the researchers found was that people wanted to be heard—they wanted their opinions and ideas treated with respect—and that people were willing to accept outcomes they disagreed with if they believed the process used to come to a decision was fair, and that the leader didn't just seek their opinion as a ruse.

In sum, these five tactics, in addition to emphasizing common goals, lead not to less conflict, but to more healthy and productive conflict. What these researchers affirmed is that if there is a little conflict over issues, there's also likely to be poor decision-making. Conflict over issues, not personalities, is valuable. The successful teams avoided groupthink, which has been a primary cause of failure in both public and private sections. The researchers found "the alternative to conflict is usually not agreement, but apathy and disengagement."

ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
Once you establish a mission statement around conflict for your organization such as storytelling and facilitating, you'll want to consider structures that support creative conflict management and help incubate productive conflict. A successful model for the conflict-skilled organization involves the following:

- A creative conflict management mission statement
- Leaders who model skillful conflict resolution through walking the talk
- Skilled mediators to resolve conflict that people cannot directly resolve
- Skilled coaches to advise people in the midst of conflict
- Conflict management skills training specifically tailored for leaders, mediators, coaches, and all employees
- Accountability

The first element of this program—a mission statement—was discussed earlier in this article. The other elements also require careful consideration.

BASIC CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS TRAINING
An organization that wants to successfully and creatively manage conflict should consider basic conflict management training for all employees. These trainings should be four to six hours in length and cover the organization's overall mission, policies and procedures around conflict, and the basic management skills employees need. The sessions should be designed to be practical, hands-on and experiential. Participants should experience a successful conflict resolution exercise as well as understanding of the theories and steps involved. The session should emphasize the power of attitude about conflict to encourage employees to value and embrace conflict in order to drive innovation.

The most successful organizations will make such trainings mandatory for all employees.

ADVANCED TRAINING FOR COACHES, FACILITATORS, AND MEDIATORS
After completing the basic training, those with the interest and ability to serve as coaches, facilitators and mediators should move on to advanced training. This training would help people learn two skills:

1. Providing confidential coaching to those in the midst of conflict
2. Serving as coaches, facilitators and mediators for those who cannot creatively manage conflict themselves

Organizations should consider training one coach/mediator for every 50 to 100 employees. This training would also be highly interactive, focusing on mediation and coaching skills beyond the basics. The training should take two and a half to five days.

EXECUTIVE BRIEFING
Ideally, executives should take both levels of training since surveys show they spend at least one fourth of their time resolving and mediating conflicts. At the least, executives should be briefed as to the basics of the program in a one to two hour session and receive a taste of the regular training.

If you skip this step, you won't have executives who understand the process and "walk the talk." They tend not to encourage their subordinates to go to the other sessions and do not use the same language to manage conflicts. Although it can be difficult to convince the executives to take the time to sit through even a short briefing, it will be well worth the effort in the long run.

ACCOUNTABILITY
The last piece of the puzzle to creating a conflict-positive organization is to focus on accountability. None of the other moves will create the level of cooperation, community and teamwork you need in your organization without this important element.

For example, Helen, the president of a large manufacturing company, hired a consultant to conduct a conflict management workshop at their annual executive retreat. She'd told the consultant that one of their problems was that some people on the executive team used an overly aggressive style of conflict resolution while others triangulated conflict. The workshop was a success based on the feedback

and participation; in fact, the executives wanted to expand the session to a full day class and bring it to all of their other managers. Over the next month, the consultant conducted day-long workshops for their entire management team across the country. Again, the feedback was positive.

In the consultant's last meeting with Helen, she thanked her for making the workshops a success, but lamented that—even though they'd provided the skills—one VP was still a problem. His behavior included incredible displays of rudeness, attacks and constant criticism of the other executives and managers, yelling profanity and a general inability to be a team player, even though he was good at his own substantive area of expertise.

"I just don't understand why he won't change," she sighed. The consultant then asked the obvious question: "Have you talked to him about his behavior?" Helen responded that she had, several times, but nothing shifted.

The consultant then went on to emphasize to her the difference between a talk about his behavior and making him accountable for his behavior. She'd never enforced any *consequences* for his inappropriate behavior. The consultant then suggested that she needed to make improving his behavior a part of his performance plan, complete with consequences up to and including termination if he failed to meet those requirements. Helen revealed she was concerned about losing someone who was substantively good at what he did, yet she understood failure to do so would continue to undermine the entire executive team. Miraculously, when Helen followed the advice and included accountability for his behavior, he started to improve his skills.

You have the right and, indeed, the responsibility as a leader or manager to insist that all of your individual contributors make creative conflict management a part of their job description. Just giving them the skills may not be enough if you fail to follow through with significant consequences for their failure to improve.

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS IN PRACTICE
With this system in place in a conflict-positive organization, most conflicts would be managed directly between the involved parties. If they are unable to do so, the participants could request individual coaching sessions from designated coaches. If that fails, they could then request mediation. Leaders could also refer associates to mediators to resolve disputes.

This approach allows an organization to take a systemic approach to creative conflict management and will result in significant savings in lost productivity, time and energy. This system also prevents a rise in the negative spiral of unproductive and personal conflicts, lawsuits and other costly disputes. Finally, this system will help you harness the power of a good fight to improve productivity and innovation. The time an organization invests in this system and training will bring dramatic results for all involved and incubate many creative conflicts within your organization.

LEADERSHIP AND STORYTELLING

Storytelling is the final piece of the puzzle of designing a creative approach to conflict management. Much has been written in recent years about leadership in general and the need for all employees to become leaders, not just employees. Yet these writers miss two significant nuances: the need to give people *meaning* in their work and the power of *story* as a tool for encouraging meaning and for serving as a model for the "why" behind conflict management. *Meaning drives motivation.* People must have common goals or resolution is not possible. Many organizational conflicts result from disbelief in or a lack of understanding about:

- Why the organization exists
- Why the organization does what it does
- What the organization's true goals are

Skillfully using stories can help change this dynamic.

Glen Gienko, executive vice president of human resources for Motorola in Schaumburg, Illinois, agrees that leadership and storytelling are keys to making constructive conflict a part of the fabric of an organizational culture. As he recalls:

> Fifteen years ago during an officers' meeting in which everyone was celebrating the success of the company, one employee stood up in front of his peers and their spouses and proclaimed that Motorola's quality stunk. The willingness of (that lone) employee to speak against the grain ultimately turned into Motorola's highly praised Six Sigma quality effort. Today, we tell this story over and over as a way to show employees what constructive dissent can do for a company.[9]

Futurist Rolf Jensen claims that in the years ahead we will move into what he calls the Dream Society:

In today's Information Society, we prize those who can skillfully manipulate data; in tomorrow's Dream Society—focused on dreams, adventure, spirituality and feelings—we will most generously reward those who can tell stories . . . . In the future, the notion that the work should be no more than a means of obtaining something else will disappear. People will, of course, be paid for working, but money will not be the main reason for working. People will require meaning in their work."[10]

Current surveys of Generation-Xers place "meaning" high on the list of what they look for in a job. Aging baby boomers—having passed through their materialistic stage—will also demand meaning in their work, not just management.

Organizations will have to develop a collective meaning to survive and to resolve the ever-escalating conflicts. Companies in the future will also have to show that they have values and contribute to society.

Leaders will be increasingly called upon to help give meaning to employees. Of course, before you can help others find meaning in their work, you have to find it in your own. Meaning fuels the sometimes-challenging work of conflict management.

Can all honest, legal work have meaning, dignity and value? Yes, it can. If you doubt this, read Victor Frankl's classic work, *Man's Search for Meaning,* about finding meaning in his work as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. There may be more difficult environments, but it's difficult to image where or when.

Even if your current job doesn't fit your long-term passion, find meaning in the support the work provides as you plan for more passionate future work. Find meaning in doing what you do with excellence and integrity. Mother Theresa noted, "We do not do great things. We do small things with great love." Ultimately, if you can't find meaning in your work, leave. The dilemma is this: The future will require such a level of commitment that you will not be able to sustain your work with anything less than all out dedication.

One way to give meaning to your work and to work of those you lead is through storytelling. As we moved into Jensen's Dream Society, in the later part of the

twentieth century, it's no accident we elected an actor, Ronald Reagan, as president of this country and a playwright, Václav Havel, as president of the Czech Republic.

How powerful are stories? "Everybody is a story," writes Dr. Naomi Remen in her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal.*

> When I was a child, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories. We don't do that so much anymore. Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time, it is the way wisdom gets passed along. Despite the awesome powers of technology many of us still do not live very well. We may need to listen to one another's stories again.[11]

Loneliness is the hidden wound of our time—the price many have paid for embracing such frontier values as independence, self-reliance and competence. It's also a price paid by those who frequently change jobs. In the future, leaders will be increasingly called upon to remember we are all connected and can become a community, to help organizations work more cooperatively and to move toward goals with humor, meaning, purpose and quality companionship. A good story provides a compass for a group's mission. Skillful conflict management builds trust and creates connections and helps a group work together to accomplish its mission.

As a leader, how do you discover and develop your own stories to inspire others? Look at your *wounds.* There is power in the wounded leader. As Nietzsche wrote, "life breaks all of us eventually, but some of us grow back stronger in the broken places." Ironically, our greatest strengths come from these wounds, from what makes us vulnerable, because our vulnerability also makes us human. And in our humanity lies our ability to connect with and lead others. At the heart of most wounds is a conflict. The healing of most wounds involves connection.

The ability to appropriately reveal our wounds and vulnerability makes the most powerful leaders. Bob Dole, despite his physical wounds, was not. It's why Clinton won a reelection (despite his many mishaps) and Hillary may not. It's why Marilyn Monroe—"the vulnerable blonde"—is a timeless cultural icon and Madonna never will be. (Unless, of course, parenthood brings Madonna to her knees, as it does most of us.)

How do you develop storytelling ability? After you look at our wounds, ask what you can teach from that place of wounding. What do you know because you brought that knowledge with your life?

Learn also from other great storytellers. Read and listen to a diverse collection of artists. Recent examples from different sources might include, for example, a novel by Haitian Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, and the Academy Award winning documentary about Maya Lin, *A Strong Clear Vision*. Danticat evokes the conflict, terror and heartache, along with the wonder of her native Haiti, telling the story of a people who resist the brutality of their rulers through the powers of imagination and community. Through her work, those of us who find the news from Haiti too painful to hear can understand the place more deeply than we ever thought possible. Out of her wounds, and the many conflicts in her country, Danticat weaves her life and culture into a powerful force to move us to understanding and action. Similarly, you can use your own life and culture to move your organization closer to its goals.

Maya Lin, the architect who at 20 beat out hundreds of more established architects to win the contest to design the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, recounted how wounded she felt in the conflict when people attacked and misunderstood her design. Yet she found that out of that wound came the inspiration to design more and even greater work. Her story inspires all of us.

Tell stories. Use them in your work. Search for the stories of others in songs, novels, poems and dance. Practice them first if you must—in front of your kids, a Toastmasters' group, or your book club—but weave them into the memos and reports you write and the meetings you lead.

When you do, you will have taken an important step into the future toward leadership in conflict management through the power of storytelling. You will help your organization move forward to become a conflict-positive organization.

THE ROLE OF THE LEADER IN CREATIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
The CEO of a high-tech company finally decided to fire Frank, his CFO—a technically brilliant man who was lacking in "people skills." Employees constantly carped about the CFO's abusive, abrupt and intimidating manner.

When the CEO delivered the news that he could no longer defend the manager against the rising tide of employee complaints (and even one pending lawsuit), Frank's surprised response is typical of many in today's workplace: "In some companies, my style would be considered an advantage. People around here are just too sensitive!"

Another CEO decided to upgrade the computer department in his company from data management to a true information technology department. On the advice of a headhunter, he hired someone from a larger computer firm, an old-fashioned hierarchical company. The ensuing cultural wars shocked the CEO. Long-time employees reacted with anger and tears to the dictatorial regime of the new manager. The CEO found he had no time to run his thriving and complex company. Instead, his days were spent trying to mediate disputes among the new manager, his team and other departments.

A third company reorganized its large HR department and brought in several new players to invigorate the team. The result? Another culture clash! The old team insisted workers need HR representatives who are *employee advocates.* The new managers wanted to move up the ladder of corporate success. They were convinced that the way to do that was to raise the visibility of HR and make HR representatives *business partners* with the leaders of their business units. When an outside consultant was called in to facilitate a session to creatively manage this dispute, some of the people were not even speaking to one another.

What is the common denominator in all of these situations? The leaders in these organizations had not spent enough time and energy thinking about *culture*—that invisible glue that holds organizations together and determines organizational effectiveness. The leaders especially had not thought about how the culture should address and creatively manage the inevitable and valuable conflicts each organization faces on a daily basis. A lack of agreement about a common culture may show up as constant and unproductive conflicts.

Even somewhat successful organizations have frequently spent little time thinking about what kind of culture they want to create and what kind of employees will assist them in building that culture, as well as how to shape, deliver and reinforce that message. A clear culture can become an organization's brand: a powerful tool in attracting and retaining top talent. The executive team may have spent a few hours working on a superficial and platitudinous mission statement they then

proceed to plaster on the walls of employee lunchrooms and insert into the employee manual, but a successful culture will result from only two things:

1. Top leaders walking the talk; and
2. Constantly engaging employees in ongoing discussions about culture.

When organizations take the time to do this kind of work, the culture they want to create becomes what Margaret Wheatley, in her book, *Leadership and the New Science,* calls a "field of vision"—a powerful structuring field where certain types of individual behavior and events are guaranteed. Such a structuring field is especially important in communicating how you want people to manage conflict. All of the organizational research has shown that culture is one of the most important factors in creating a healthy, long-lasting company.

Leaders need to encourage other leaders and serve as models to create energy fields that shape organizational culture, especially how they model and value conflict management. Wheatley sees leaders as "broadcasters, talk radio beacons of information, pulsing out messages everywhere . . . stating, clarifying, discussing, modeling, filling all of the space with the messages we care about."[12]

Leading in the future will require even the best executives to acquire new skills. The old order in the workplace is clearly crumbling, but the new has not yet emerged. In between, a great many misunderstandings occur. If not skillfully managed, these misunderstandings escalate into unproductive conflicts.

For example, a major law firm launched a diversity project. The firm had gone through a number of steps of the project over a series of months, but kept putting off the one key phase: having a series of focus groups with partners and associates to help determine the issues they would need to address in diversity trainings. When their outside diversity consultant finally confronted the Executive Committee to find out why they kept dragging their feet on scheduling those meetings, the chairman blurted out:

> But we don't want some of our partners meeting with associates. They're idiots. They'll say all the wrong things. They'll make the associates want to leave! They just don't understand these issues. In fact, I don't even like them. I haven't talked to some of them in years.

Now this is an interesting way to run a law firm, but it doesn't lead to productivity, teamwork and profitability. It's impossible to keep toxic partners, managers or supposed leaders away forever from lower level employees. If the firm doesn't have leaders who will "walk the talk," reinforcing the culture they want to create, there's no way it will ultimately accomplish its goals.

The reality is that today's new workforce trends call for new leadership attitudes. Organizations now face historic shortages of skilled employees to fill many positions, making it essential to retain productive employees and attract the best new employees. Worker loyalty is at an all-time low, with people changing jobs so frequently that leaders have no time to build cohesive teams. Those workers who are available are much more diverse and have a different work ethic, creating the need to lead differently. Increased employee litigation and unproductive conflict distracts leaders from their mission. Setting aside the time to create, discuss and shape organizational culture is one part of the solution to these problems. Leaders must force ongoing conversations at every level about the power of culture in an organization, especially about how to creatively manage the inevitable and increasing conflicts.

One of the best ways to address the issue of purpose and culture is to strive to make community building a part of an organization's purpose. Many successful business leaders now see community building as a pragmatic business decision. Community building seems to be a particularly compelling organizational purpose for most employees.

Larry Weber, for example, is founder of Weber Shandwick International, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies, a $7 billion advertising and marketing conglomerate. He believes new leaders succeed because they've abandoned the military management style and instead are what Weber calls the "provocateurs." Provocateurs, he emphasized in a recent interview,[13] see themselves as community builders with the customer at the center. These days most customers are nomads who are looking for places to camp out. The more engaging, useful or attractive provocateurs can make their communities, the better their chances are of attracting and keeping customers.

Weber cites Rick Wagoner, CEO of General Motors, as a new-style provocateur inside an old-style company:

Every day, he has to deal with a dozen or more constituencies that he can't control, from customers to employees, strategic allies, business partners, legislators, and labor unions. Wagoner sees it as his job to get those constituencies to work together for the benefit of the GM community. If he can strengthen the GM community, then GM will succeed.[14]

Weber believes that provocateurs understand that a CEO must see his or her primary job as "to engage in deep, constant dialogue with all the company's constituencies." Weber exhorts leaders to "build a community, not a company," noting "the strength of a business is measured by the strength of its relationships."[15]

SUMMARY

In summary, an organizational culture that fosters creative conflicts and incubates innovation exhibits these traits:

- The organization's mission, values and priorities are clearly expressed and modeled through leaders who walk the talk and reinforce the culture through storytelling.
- Risk-taking is encouraged; people take intelligent risks; and mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities.
- Diversity is welcomed and valued; workers are educated in diverse thinking and conflict styles.
- Decision-making is shared; people are encouraged to participate in making decisions in their area of expertise.
- Group wisdom is respected by making use of diverse teams to solve problems; because of a belief in the creative potential of the group, conflict is valued.
- Members of the group understand that conflict is a part of life and are trained in creative conflict management with the ability to disagree about issues instead of personalities; they understand we all have a piece of the truth.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Eisenhardt, Kathleen M., Jean L. Kahwajy, and L. J. Bouncgious, III. "How Many Teams Can Have a Good Fight?" Harvard Business Review. July /August 997, Vol. 75, Issue 4.

[2]Putnam, Linda L. "Productive Conflict: Negotiation as Implicit Coordination." *The International Journal of Conflict Management.* July 1991, Vol. 5, No. 3.

[3]Arad, Sharon, Mary Ann Hanson, and Robert Schneider. "A Framework for the Study of Relationships Between Organizational Characteristics and Organizational Innovation." *Journal of Creative Behavior.* Volume 31, Number 1 (1997): 42-58.

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[6]Leonard-Barton, Dorothy, *Wellsprings of Knowledge.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1995.

[7]Quotes and modified portions reprinted by permission of Harvard Business Press from Leonard, Dorothy, and Walter Swap. *When Sparks Fly: Igniting Creativity in Groups.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999. Copyright 1999 by Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap. All rights reserved.

[8]Eisenhardt, Kathleen M., Jean L. Kahwajy, and L. J. Bourgeois, III. "How Many Teams Can Have a Good Fight?" Harvard Business Review. July /August 997, Vol. 75, Issue 4.

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