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Conflict Management Part 3 – Constructive Conflict

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Bill passed Ted at the front desk, offered a wave of his hand, and they exchanged brief pleasantries. As he approached the first conference room, he heard raised voices and noticed the door was slightly ajar. Curiosity got the better of him and he snuck a peek inside.

The scene appeared intense. Lacey and Sam sat across from each other, locked in a serious discussion. Bill listened intently to their debate.

“If we go with your proposal, Sam, would you agree that there is inherent risk of cost overrun for this project?” Lacey asked pointedly.

“Yes, there is risk,” Sam acknowledged. “But it is manageable. I’ve shown you the safeguards to keep it from getting out of control.”

“Sam, as project manager, it’s my hide if those risks are realized. I have no intention of taking the fall for that. If it gets out of control, it has career implications for me!” Lacey tapped her notepad with her pen for emphasis. Distress had leaked into her voice.

Bill snuck away from the door and headed back to the front desk.

“Looks like it’s heating up in Conference Room A,” Bill informed Ted, with wide eyes and his thumb cocked over his shoulder. “Sounds like Sam’s proposal isn’t going over too well for Lacey’s project...or her career!”

“Ha! Nonsense,” Ted chuckled. “I know something you don’t know. Lacey isn’t the project manager on this one...Sam is; and it’s Lacey’s proposal.”

“What?!” Bill looked incredulous. “But I just heard...”

“What you heard is role reversal,” Ted explained. “They do this all the time with important issues. Each argues the other’s side as if it was their own. It gives them more insight into the issue and helps them explore each other’s perspective. They say it helps them make better decisions and work more effectively together. I think they’re on to something...”

The foregoing exchange between Lacey and Sam is an example of how creative Constructive Conflict can be. Lacey and Sam have developed a system when conflict arises whereby they argue the other person’s position as if it were their own. This systematic approach immediately diffuses the tension that can arise from entrenching themselves in their own self interests. It forces them to validate and empathize with a different perspective.

An approach like this:

- Focuses on the issue as it relates to the work itself and the implications it has for the people involved. People are reluctant to attack themselves personally, so the focus is driven to the critical elements of the issue, or the ‘working mechanics.’

- Removes much of the personal bias that can cloud an issue. It becomes easier to find better solutions to problems.
- Stokes healthy competition between parties. Approaches like this can reveal unrealized flaws and/or benefits in a proposal which encourages critical thinking and preparedness.

Role reversal is by no means the only tool that aids in creative Constructive Conflict. But it does require a certain level of maturity and skill. Start small to begin with. Here are some simple ideas to aid in successfully tackling issues that arise:

- Provide equal opportunity for people to voice their positions, using a timer if necessary. It is important for people to feel that they are being heard. People stop listening if this feeling isn't met.
- Ask people to only express themselves and their feelings personally, not what they perceive are other people's feelings or intentions. Blame is a game of diffusing personal responsibility. Using "I" statements makes people recognize that they are part of the situation and hold accountability.
- Play 'Devil's Advocate' by taking up a position opposite or alternative to the one being presented. This forces people to argue the merits of their position without feeling personally attacked...but only if you announce that you are doing it and ask for permission.
- Celebrate successful solutions. Verbally acknowledge and celebrate positive resolutions. Let everyone feel how good it is to navigate issues without blame, attacks, or hard feelings.

Be careful when trying to apply Constructive Conflict practices to toxic situations. We can feel inadequate if we cannot find solutions to problems, but we can also undermine our own intentions, efforts and relationships by trying to take on something that is out of our depth and requires greater expertise. Seek a specialist to assist in really destructive situations.

Dealing with conflict constructively and effectively takes skill. Since it is a skill, we can all improve. The first lesson in improvement is to view conflict as an opportunity to practice. A safe choice for practice is training. In training, the situations are designed to be safe and to demonstrate real-life applications and successful engagement strategies.

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