

# **Creative Conflict, Leadership and Change**

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## **Conflict and Change**

We live in constant change. Businesses have to continue to evolve and change in order to compete, to keep up with new technologies, to recruit and retain the best employees. Individuals have to change, learn and grow professionally just to stay current with the requirements of their jobs, let alone move up in their organizations and chosen careers.

One of the inevitable facts of being in a transition is that it evokes conflict. This is as much the case for individuals as it is for organizations. Change and transition create friction and conflict. But this is not the problem most of us take it to be. In fact, conflict is a wonderful gift—it is the engine that drives progress.

There is nothing inherently wrong with conflict. This is good news, because conflict appears to be inherent in the structure of the universe, so there is no escaping it. As any physicist would tell us, if there were no conflict among forces there would, quite simply, be no physical universe as we know it. Instead we would have a steady state, with no change of any kind, nothing new (and nothing old), no evolution.

The great gift of conflict is that it carries within it the seeds of something new and potentially better than what has been. As Albert Einstein noted, “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.” Conflict serves as the messenger telling us we that can no longer fruitfully remain at the current level, that is time to evolve. More importantly, it is by successfully harnessing the generative energy of conflict that we can find our way to the next level.

## **Conflict, Pain and Fear**

Conflict drives evolution and development, whether it is of our planet, our species, our organizations, or the changes each of us undergo as individuals. Yet many of us look on conflict as uncomfortable at best, if not dangerous, painful, and frightening. This is not so difficult to understand, considering that human history has been rife with conflicts that have resulted in pain, suffering and often death—sometimes for one or two people, sometimes for tens of thousands. Other assessments and feelings that often arise around conflict include competition, antagonism, anger, aggression, winning and losing, power and powerlessness.

In her book, *The Argument Culture*, Deborah Tannen notes that in our society we tend to look at the world from an either/or, win/lose perspective. For us, conflict is seen primarily through the either/or lens. In this simplistic view possibilities for the future are limited to just three: my way, your way, or some kind of compromise way that can be formed by each of us giving up some of what we want, a kind of lose-a-little/lose-a-little solution.

Viewed through this lens, it's not surprising we try to avoid conflict. And, if it can't be avoided it, we should fight to win. We certainly don't want to lose, and compromise is only marginally better. This approach to conflict makes it almost impossible to recognize and capitalize on its gift. As long as this is going on the individuals involved stay stuck in the conflict and stuck at

the current level. They fail to move toward something better.

### **The Two Gifts of Conflict**

On the surface level change evokes conflict between individuals and groups. When we view conflict from this level it is threatening. At a deeper level, however, change offers us two great gifts. One is that conflicts between people, groups, systems, processes, and ideas signal the need for change. For the leader who is aware of this, conflict can serve as a clear message that some change needs to occur. The other great gift of conflict lies in how it can be used to determine what changes are best to make. Practicing *creative conflict* will lead to better ideas, systems, processes, and relationships.

Using conflict creatively, a company can direct its energy toward creating a new, better approach to a situation, a process or an idea. The best solutions almost always arise out of a conversation that includes creative conflict. Powerfully generative energy is born out of the tension of holding seemingly opposing forces, ideas, directions, wants and needs with openness, compassion, and authentic exploration. When people in conflict are willing to do this, what eventually happens is that they find a way to transcend the old, opposing stories they held and emerge together into a new, larger story that is much more effective than their old stories.

The result of using conflict in this way is a new and better solution. This doesn't mean it has to be radically different than what came before. But the understanding that emerges will offer new possibilities for more effective action. And it is critical that the "new way" contains room to include the key interests expressed in the old, opposing views. It is not a "compromise" solution in which each party gives something up. What all parties do have to give up is their old stories. They must be willing to explore the possibility of something new and better.

The key to creative conflict is that its focus is on ideas, processes, interests, and outcomes. In the destructive process most people understand as conflict the focus is on winning or, failing that, finding a tolerable compromise. Conversation is primarily about different positions and personalities. It is also about the past: what happened, who did what, who was to blame. With creative conflict, on the other hand, people are concerned primarily with the outcome. They are engaged in a search for the best answers, the most effective ideas for the future.

### **Conflict and Leadership**

A great leader is one who recognizes that conflict comes bearing gifts. Instead of avoiding it, they welcome conflict as an indicator that change is necessary. And they foster creative conflict as an ally on a journey to something better. Rather than seeking simply to "win" a conflict at the current level, they use it as a tool to uncover better possibilities and evolve to a new level from which the problems created at the lower level can be solved.

In his landmark book *Good To Great* (Harper Business, 2001), Jim Collins and his researchers identified a group of eleven companies that, by their rigorous standards, had become and remained "great." Based on exhaustive research, reading and personal interviews, they then identified what those eleven great companies do differently from all the rest. One key difference

Collins notes is how the leadership teams in those companies foster creative conflict as a way of setting their courses and navigating their way to greatness.

He captures how they use conflict Collins this way: "...all the good-to-great companies had a penchant for intense dialogue. Phrases like 'loud debate,' 'heated discussions,' and 'healthy conflict' peppered the articles and interview transcripts from all the companies."

These companies don't avoid conflict, and they aren't employing win/lose strategies or seeking compromises. They are harnessing the immense power of generative conversations around conflicting ideas to continuously evolve themselves into the best companies they can be.

### **Preconditions for Creative Conflict**

Creative conflict doesn't just happen. We human beings have had extensive practice at destructive conflict, something that requires some effort to change. Adopting a creative approach to conflict takes *specific intent*, the ability to *build and maintain an environment of trust*, and a particular set of *communication skills* to lead a conversation that uses conflict creatively.

It starts with having a clear, explicit intent to use the gifts conflict offers. When you do, you will recognize when conflict is telling you that something needs to change. To use conflict creatively you have to have sufficient trust, or be able to build enough trust that the people involved will feel they can let go of their old conflict story and try something different. (In fact, conflict often indicates that building greater trust is the very change that is needed.)

Unlike the *intent* to use conflict creatively, which can only come from within, *building trust* and using effective *communication* skills can (and have to be) be learned. Leaders develop competency in these areas through a combination of trial and error, coaching, mentoring, and reading a few of the many good books that have been written on these subjects.

When these conditions are in place, leaders can turn conflict into as a powerful ally, a tool to identify the best changes to make, changes that will bring the greatest benefit to everyone involved. One sign of a great leader is the man or woman who uses conflict in just this way.