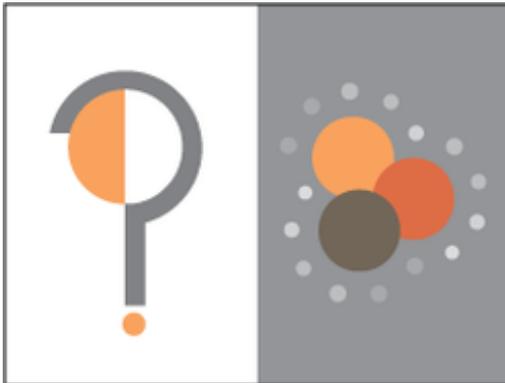


Organizational Change: Creative Conflict



Many leaders find it uncomfortable to engage with conflict. Some want to please people rather than disappoint or upset them. Others are not comfortable in situations that feel stressful or tense.

A leader who is personally comfortable may not understand why others are uncomfortable or why they would choose to avoid or ignore conflict.

How a leader addresses and engages with conflict and difficult issues sets a tone for how employees and colleagues will respond. This blog post addresses the importance of surfacing conflict and differing views, particularly in times of change. The more complex the change, the more essential this becomes. People's willingness to engage with conflict reflects their prior experience with the risks of speaking up.

Leaders need to anticipate that conflicting viewpoints will arise

People in organizations have as many views as they have vantage points on the work, given their expertise, roles, responsibilities, accountabilities, and experiences. Differences are natural and inevitable. This multiplicity of perspectives and expertise can strengthen the outcomes if they are discussed and thought about effectively.

The role of the leader in discussing conflicting views

In uncomfortable situations people want to engage with leaders who are not judgmental, critical, or blaming. They want leaders who can hear difficult things without reacting emotionally and who can actively engage in listening to understand the issues and think about them constructively with others.

Differing perspectives and conflict may not surface easily. It is important for leaders to actively work with colleagues and employees to find and address conflict. The degree of ease that a leader feels about dealing with differences and conflicts has a strong impact on how others will respond to the leader.

What is your level of ease in difficult discussions and with conflict?

How does this come across to others? What is the impact on them, on discussions, and on problem-solving? Do the discussions deepen and are they active and candid, or do they shut down with little engagement and openness? Do people leave a difficult discussion feeling good and knowing how to go forward, or are they guarded and without resolution?

Encourage expression of conflicting views. Here are some guidelines to surface and manage conflict in discussions:

- **Be actively engaged and do not ignore conflict.** Ask people what they need to be aware of, and where and why there are needs or conflict that can create issues going forward. Let conflicting views surface; ask for them. Let the participants know that you genuinely want to hear their perspectives and ideas. Identify confusion or lack of clarity that needs to be addressed. Ask participants what they need from you as leader on the issues.
 - **Give discussions ample time.** Do not speed up the discussion; instead, slow it down and tell people this is important and your focus and intent is to hear people and their views. Encourage everyone to participate actively and express their opinions. This is not easy when people are unaccustomed to bringing difficulties forward. Based on their past experience, they may enter these discussions cautiously or with resistance.
 - **Let silence happen.** Silence does not mean agreement. People will be silent when they are concerned about how they might come across, want to avoid stepping out of line, or fear reprisals. Silence indicates something needs to be addressed. Let the silence exist; sit quietly and wait for someone to speak. If the speaker's comments deepen the conversation, ask others what they think in response. If someone tries to change the subject, this indicates discomfort. Bring the conversation back to the issue and let participants know the importance of thinking further about it.
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Acknowledge emotions and make them part of the discussion.

Emotions are normal responses in times of change, conflict, and difficulties, and they affect people's thinking and actions. Be aware of these emotions and consider how they impact participants and the issues or work. Ask people how they feel about an issue, how the people who work for them feel about the issue, and what their challenges are and why.

Factors in the emotional response to conflict:

- **Fear stifles conflict and stops people from speaking up.** Within the fear is something people feel they need to protect. Perhaps they want to uphold their reputation, be seen as a team player, protect another person or themselves, or prevent possible reprisal. Individuals may think they are the only person in the room who has a particular concern, but this is rarely the case.
- **People react based on their past experience with conflict.** If someone has had an unpleasant experience with a leader or colleague, they are naturally cautious. To become more comfortable, they need to have new experiences that change their perceptions of dealing with those leaders and colleagues, the environment, and the risk of speaking up. As leader, consider how your own reactions and engagement have affected people and conversations in the past. What impressions have people formed of you and what impact has it had on them?
- **People need to feel invited and supported in discussions about difficult issues.** They need to believe they are engaged in problem-solving and learning with others, and that the discussions will benefit the work and people involved. It is important that leaders who have stifled or ignored conflict in the past now begin to engage directly with others and let them know they are interested and committed to understanding and working through issues. Leaders who tend to react in ways that feel overwhelming or judgmental to others should approach issues and discussions as calmly and patiently as possible, listen carefully, and ask questions without grilling or pushing others.

- **To speak openly and candidly people need to feel supported and safe.** Genuine connection, interest, and honesty on the part of the leader will encourage and support people to speak up. It takes time to build the capacity for people to have constructive, open discussions about difficult issues, yet this needs to become part of the fabric of all discussions and collective thinking. The more people engage in these discussions, the more they will strengthen their capabilities to do so.
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Take a few minutes of quiet thinking

1. How approachable do people experience you to be and why?
2. How open are you to hearing their thoughts, particularly those that are in disagreement or those that sound like people are resistant to what needs to be done?
3. How do your emotional reactions under stress express themselves to others and what is the impact on people and the discussions and the work?
4. How would colleagues and employees describe your way of dealing with conflict and differences?

A related blog post (Organizational Change: Four Key Steps to Create Transparency and Openness) addresses the importance of the leader in creating a safe environment where people can speak openly and be transparent. Ignoring this need impedes the success of the work, affects employees, and can result in unhealthy, even toxic work environments.

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