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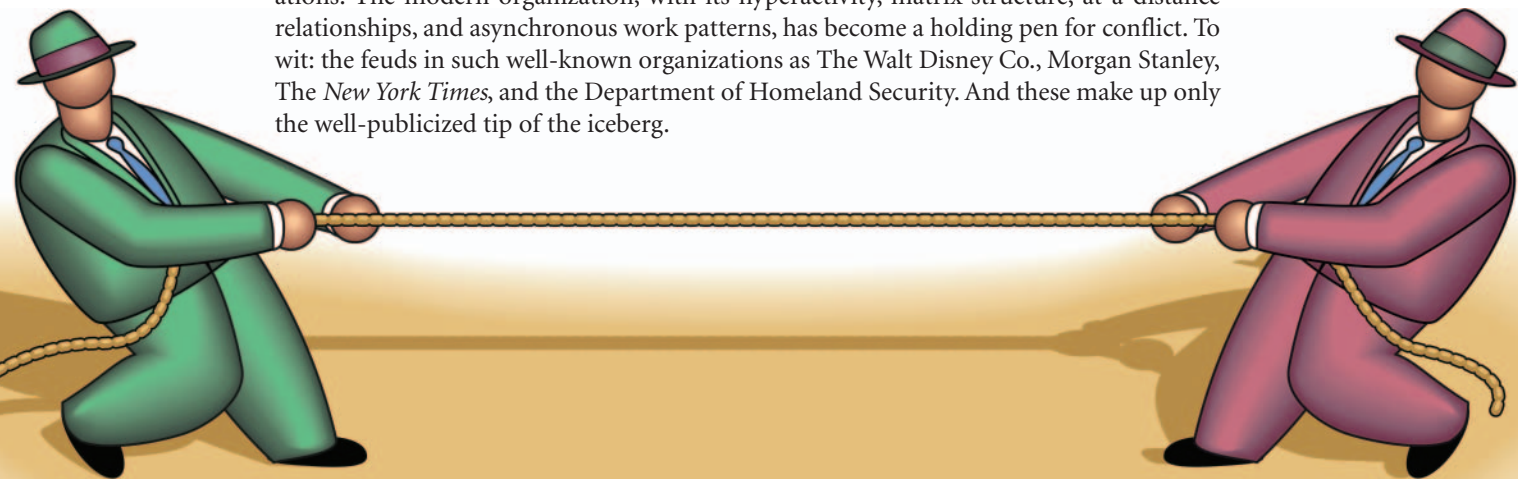
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Conflict Management as a Core Leadership Competency

BY HOWARD M. GUTTMAN

Anyone who thinks that today's human resources professionals spend their days hidden away in their offices, unraveling technical training and development issues, should listen to Coleen Smith, vice president of global human resources for consumer product company Colgate-Palmolive. "I spend 50 percent of my time," she says, "not in technical work but in helping executives figure out how to work through interpersonal relationships: whom to go to, in what sequence; what to say, what not to say; how to approach others, when to give in, when to push and when not to."

Smith's diplomatic ballet should sound familiar to HR and training professionals who spend more and more of their time helping executives sidestep potentially explosive situations. The modern organization, with its hyperactivity, matrix structure, at-a-distance relationships, and asynchronous work patterns, has become a holding pen for conflict. To wit: the feuds in such well-known organizations as The Walt Disney Co., Morgan Stanley, *The New York Times*, and the Department of Homeland Security. And these make up only the well-publicized tip of the iceberg.



The challenge most companies perennially face is not how to eliminate conflict but how to transform negative energy into productive relationships and positive business results. It's a challenge that presents great opportunities for training professionals. By treating conflict management as a core leadership competency, and then working

others," says the organizational development and talent director for Masterfoods USA, a food and beverage manufacturer in Hackettstown, N.J. Burbery believes that the key to achieving lasting behavior change is providing people with opportunities to use their new interpersonal skills once they are back on the job.

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to change both the organizational conditions and individual behaviors that foster dysfunctional behavior, they can contribute significantly to their organization's success.

Beyond the Classroom

Many management training departments offer conflict management training programs to educate employees in negotiation skills, interpersonal skills, group dynamics and the like. The problem is that these bread-and-butter offerings don't go far enough. "People don't leave their 'inner selves' at the office door," says Craig Mangan, director of HR at Parsippany, N.J.-based Sankyo Pharma. "You can't expect them to change deeply rooted behavior by skills transfer alone."

Sylvia Burbery agrees. "Conflict management is a difficult competency for people to develop. It often means changing lifelong ways of behaving and interacting with

markets around the world. Facilitators will conduct Mars-specific workshops, during which participants will practice newly acquired skills in live-action situations.

They will also provide additional support to individual participants after the formal portion of the training, and observe and coach teams as they put the skills to use in their interactions. "Relying on outside experts to develop workshop content, then using in-house facilitators to deploy the training," says Arvinder Dhesi, director of organization development for Mars University, "will put in place expert facilitators whose in-depth knowledge of our company uniquely qualifies them to help participants apply the training within our culture."

The Team Approach

One of the best ways to ensure that skills get transferred from the classroom to the real world is by training all the

Look for Opportunities to Coach

If you're serious about moving from teaching skills in the classroom to helping people use them on the job, it's key to seek out opportunities to coach workshop graduates. Here are three areas to focus on to effectively coach conflict management.

Look for the right venues. Look for areas where responsibilities overlap, where handoffs are required, and where there is ambiguity. "Conflict has its source not only in relationships but in an organization's structure, systems, and processes," says Ken Murphy, senior vice president of HR and

administration for Altria Group, the parent company of Philip Morris and Kraft Foods. Craig Mangan, director of HR for Sankyo Pharma, cites an example of a pharmaceutical company in which he once worked where the training department's information system overlapped with the company's overall system. It was a potential powder keg, but Mangan used it as an opportunity to coach his colleagues to diffuse the situation.

Coleen Smith, Colgate-Palmolive's vice president of global human resources, looks for what

she calls the "plate spinners" in the organization—managers who stockpile information but somehow can't come to conclusions. "Nothing happens, people get frustrated, and the calls come in from team members," she says.

Ask good questions. One set of questions deals with consequence thinking: If you do or say this, then what are the consequences? How serious would this be? Are there other ways to come to a resolution? Behavior modification is often a function of calculating consequences. Or try "coaching by walking around." Make it a point to meet former workshop participants and ask:

What have you done to honor the contracts you made during the alignment session? Are you having problems interacting with anyone on your team? Which skills could be of use to you in dealing with them, and how can I help you apply them?

Avoid being the rescuer. It's ego-gratifying for a coach or training professional to step in and play Solomon, and it's easy for an executive in a conflict-laden situation to let someone else carry the water and confront the other party. But it's not a good idea. "It takes away the accountability for problem solving from the person who should have it," Smith says.



members of an intact team at once. As Burbery points out, “When you train individuals from different functions or different sites, who may never meet again after the training session, they don’t have any real issues among them. But when you are working with an intact team, especially one that has reached some level of candor, you can work on real issues right away.”

game playing, and the like. Facilitators help the team deal with live issues, especially the ones everyone knows about but nobody wants to acknowledge. They reinforce a code of behavior that rewards candor and head-on confrontation. Individual team members contract with one another to change their behavior. The idea is to make each team

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into a high-performance board of directors that is able and willing to step up to a new level of play.

After the initial alignment session, the trainer/facilitator will follow up with individual team members to make sure they are honoring their contracts, and will recon-

Training of intact teams should begin with the top management team, which typically exercises a gravitational pull on the rest of the organization. The model at Masterfoods is to first reframe how the top team works together, and then, through an organizationwide alignment process, to get every team working in sync to achieve similar levels of high performance.

The alignment process ensures that there is a clear line of sight from the top team to teams at every level and across functions in four key areas: overall strategy and business goals, team members’ roles and responsibilities, ground rules for decision making and conflict management, and business relationships.

During the alignment process, team members learn and begin using conflict management skills to root out such dysfunctional behaviors as failing to confront issues openly, failing to accept accountability for results, silo

vene the full team at regular intervals. He or she will ask members to assess how well they are doing, both individually and as a team. These follow-up sessions also offer an opportunity to reinforce skills learned earlier, such as active listening, assertion, and influencing others.

Walking the talk

There are actions beyond training that training professionals can take to successfully transfer conflict management skills throughout an organization. One of those actions is to model the desired behaviors.

For example, Colgate-Palmolive’s Smith regularly works with her company’s senior management to identify employees to fill the most coveted management positions. “Sometimes a senior executive wants to promote an individual who I don’t think is right for the job,” she explains. “I could say, sure, go ahead, and not disagree

with his choice. But I owe it to myself and to the company to try to influence people based on objective feedback about and observation of the individual. So I push, I take a stand, and I don't hold back." It's exactly how she instructs others to deal with conflict, and because she does it herself, they can't argue with her.

Training and development professionals who want to be successful in teaching conflict management must be candid and encourage candor in their interactions with others, which means listening to what others have to say; not resorting to passive-aggressive or bullying tactics to get their way. It also means giving and receiving feedback in a depersonalized way. In the super-sensitive area of conflict management, modeling behavior is more effective than preaching as a tool for behavior change.

It isn't easy to be forthright, particularly in the delivery of bad news. We've seen more than a few training professionals shy away from opportunities to point out or even critique an individual's or group's behavior. "When you see inappropriate

behavior, it is your responsibility to call it to the individual's or team's attention, no matter how uncomfortable it makes you feel," Smith says. "Recently, a colleague sent out an e-mail complaining about someone. The people who received it were really angry. I had to call him and say, 'People were offended and you need to apologize. If you want to get ahead in this company, you can't afford to be perceived in that way.'"

It helps when the feedback is not just your own. At Masterfoods, 360-degree feedback is gathered on all members of teams, including the senior team. It is frequently Burberry's job to deliver that feedback, reflecting back to people the image they project to others. When the feedback indicates that the person is reverting to dysfunctional behaviors, she works with him or her to develop a plan of corrective action. "It works," she says, "because it's based on observed behavior, not opinions."

Whenever you can, encourage people to depersonalize conflict. By coaching people to raise the level of discussion, you can help them avoid the deadly zero-sum battle over alternatives. When Smith is called in to help with situations in which different camps are locked into pet alternatives, she tries to shift the focus from alternatives to objectives. "Doing so forces people to look at the possibilities instead of the options," Smith explains. "In the world of options, there's a winner and a loser; in the world of possibilities, they can all be winners. Above all, it forces people to listen to one another, which is the first step toward healthy dialogue."

Sankyo Pharma's Mangan believes that one of the


most effective conflict management tools a trainer can provide is passion. When he hires people, he looks for those who have the same kind of passion for the organization and its mission that he has. When he works with teams, he tries to get them to look first at the big picture. He asks them, What's most important in this company? Why does your team exist? What would be missing if you weren't here? "If you can get their commitment to a common goal," he says, "you can eliminate a great deal of conflict before it ever begins." True enough, which is why, during alignment sessions, the first element to focus on is goals. They provide a north star to guide discussion and channel dissent.

For years, HR professionals and trainers have lamented that they have been denied a seat at senior

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management's table. We all know that one key to greater impact is to fully understand your organization's business model and then directly connect training to business results. Developing the conflict management capabilities of the current and future generation of leaders is a great place to make the connection.

The aim is not to create one big happy family through transferring conflict management skills, but to raise performance levels through a combination of training and coaching in that area. "When you can show that an intact team that is working together effectively gets better results, or that a team that is good at conflict management is driving better business results," says Burberry, "you will be offered that seat." At least, you'll have a better case for asking for it.

Add a dash of courage to the training promise about conflict management. "If you have an idea for building high-performance teams through better alignment and a greater ability to harness everyone's energy, don't be afraid to express it," says Ken Murphy, senior vice president of HR and administration for Altria Group, the parent company of Philip Morris and Kraft Foods. "Chances are, management will be receptive. But you'll never know if you don't take the risk." 

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