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by Loren Gary



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Bury Your Opinion, Shortchange Your Team

Conflict can be destructive—everyone knows that. The surprise is that avoiding conflict may cause more problems over the long run.

LAST YEAR, David MacNair, a senior vice president for Campbell Soup, detected a problem in his Camden, N.J.-based unit's leadership team. "The team had developed an acute case of silo behavior. People didn't seem to feel the need to interact," he says. "We were functioning adequately as a group of individuals with busy jobs. But we weren't really functioning as a team."

The problem, MacNair explains, was that "team members were more comfortable talking to me about issues than to one another. They got along with one another all right, but their interactions were purely functional; they weren't engaging one another as members of a senior team with joint responsibilities for such issues as resourcing, human development, budgeting, and communications."

Management literature tends to focus on the kind of conflict characterized by interpersonal hostility. But the pattern of submerged or silenced differences of opinion that MacNair describes here is just as pernicious—and perhaps even more widespread. And when leaders are unaware of their own differences of opinion and unable to address them, everyone else in the unit pays the price. The sources and handling of conflict in leadership teams, therefore, deserves special attention.

Three recent books shed light on this subject. All acknowledge that it's not only impossible to eliminate conflict entirely but that you wouldn't want to—without conflict, you wouldn't have the differences of opinion that foster learning and creativity.

Even so, it is important to keep unacknowledged differences among team members from festering into destructive conflict and to manage conflict once it has surfaced. After a conflict has been acknowledged, the more you can depersonalize it and treat it as an organizational issue—for example, by setting up protocols for how employees who are at odds should treat one another—the better off you'll be. But to break the code of silence that helps keep differences of opinion underground, you have to be willing to take a personal risk.

The silent spiral

"Conflict-management strategies take for granted that you have a difference of opinion with someone and that you know what it is," says Harvard Business School professor Leslie A. Perlow. "In many instances, however, people aren't even aware that there's a difference because they've been silencing others' opinions and also their own."

Silencing takes many forms, observes Perlow in her book *When You Say Yes but Mean No*. Sometimes a supervisor suppresses a subordinate's differing opinion by conveying the idea that the advice is unwelcome. But silencing is also something we do to ourselves. We do it when we're dealing with our bosses, our peers, even our subordinates. And we do it with the best of intentions, Perlow says. Sometimes "people silence themselves because they truly believe that's what's best for themselves, their relationships, and the company." For example, a person might not express her disagreement for fear of derailing the team's work on a time-sensitive project.

When we act as if there is no difference of opinion, it does not disappear, notes Perlow. "Instead, it causes us to become self-protective in our relationship, and the climate in the relationship quickly disintegrates to one characterized by distrust and fear, making us all the more likely to silence in the future."

The resulting organizational damage can include broken relationships, diminished creativity, impaired learning, and poor decision making. In 1997, managers at Samsung didn't question a \$13 billion investment that would take the company into the automobile industry because the idea's champion, Samsung Chairman and CEO Kun-Hee Lee, was a forceful personality and a car buff. When Samsung Motors folded only a year into production, Lee wondered why no one had expressed reservations.

To prevent such mistakes, companies must "replace vicious silent spirals with virtuous spirals of speaking up," writes Perlow. You must be willing to take the risk of expressing your differences of opinion openly and honestly, but also strategically—in groups in which you have some standing and influence, and in situations in which airing the difference is important to the work of the group or the relationships involved. The task is one of seeking mutual understanding, Perlow writes. Although leaders play a crucial role in modeling this behavior and rewarding it in others, "everyone needs to take responsibility for speaking and listening in a way that not only ensures clear communication but also makes it easier for others to speak up."

Seeing others' perspectives

The strategies for achieving mutual understanding don't just help prevent the silent spiral, they can also help bring to the surface the hidden agendas that abound in leadership teams and help managers deal with them. "You need to create a space—public

or private—to talk about the unspoken differences,” says Deborah M. Kolb, a professor at the Simmons School of Management in Boston and coauthor of *Everyday Negotiation*. Start by demonstrating your reflexivity—your willingness to see how you may have contributed to the conflict. From there, “try to have an appreciative conversation in which you legitimate other people’s perspectives and make it possible for them to talk about how they got to their position on an issue.”

This goes beyond notions in the negotiation literature about intellectually understanding another person’s perspective, Kolb emphasizes. “You can’t

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create a connection across difference unless you understand the concrete situation in which the other person is acting. You can’t know that situation well beforehand—just by trying to imagine what it must be like. You have to create a space in which the other person can talk freely. That said, a strategy that can help put you in a connected frame of mind is to think of

good reasons that the other person would use to justify his own position or behavior. Don’t just think of one; try to come up with five.”

Organizational support

Leadership teams often need help developing the skills of active listening and reflexivity that make productive conversations about conflict possible. But the prevention of the silent spiral and the management of conflict are not simply interpersonal matters—they must become organizational competencies, argues Howard M. Guttman in *When Goliaths Clash*. The more thorough the discussion of a company’s strategic and key operational goals, the less the likelihood that significant differences of opinion will go unexpressed. The same goes for individual accountabilities. “Ask team members to list the activities that they carry out and the results that they are responsible for,” writes Guttman, “to describe how they believe their job is perceived by other players, and to identify the gaps that exist between themselves and the other team members.”

It also helps to develop team-based protocols for handling conflict. For example, when the conflict is just between two people, don’t triangulate

by looking to a third-party rescuer for resolution. Don’t actively recruit supporters for your point of view. Don’t criticize other team members when they’re not present.

Above all, try not to personalize issues. Organizational structure, rather than personal dislike, often lies behind differences being submerged. “I realized that by allowing the team members to deal primarily with me,” Campbell Soup’s MacNair says, “I was inadvertently enabling them to avoid conflict among themselves.” ❖

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RESOURCES

When Goliaths Clash: Managing Executive Conflict to Build a More Dynamic Organization
by Howard M. Guttman
AMACOM • 2003

Everyday Negotiation: Navigating the Hidden Agendas in Bargaining
by Deborah M. Kolb and Judith Williams
Jossey-Bass • 2003

When You Say Yes but Mean No: How Silencing Conflict Wrecks Relationships and Companies...and What You Can Do About It
by Leslie A. Perlow
Crown Business • 2003