

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."

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's Soup's MacNair says, "I was inadvertently enabling them to avoid conflict among themselves."

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R. David C. Macnair served as the Chief Technical Officer at Campbell Soup Company. In this role, he was instrumental in the development of "Intelligent Quisine" (IQ), a line of nutrient-fortified meals aimed at providing therapeutic benefits for conditions such as high cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure. Under Macnair's leadership, Campbell's invested approximately \$55 million over seven years into the IQ project, conducting clinical trials at eight universities to substantiate the health claims associated with the products.

Beyond his work on IQ, Macnair contributed to innovations at Campbell's, including advancements in soup formulations and packaging. He is listed as an inventor on patents related to prepackaged therapeutic meals for diet-responsive conditions.

Macnair's tenure at Campbell's reflects the company's efforts during that era to align product development with emerging health and wellness trends, despite the challenges encountered in bringing such innovative products to market.